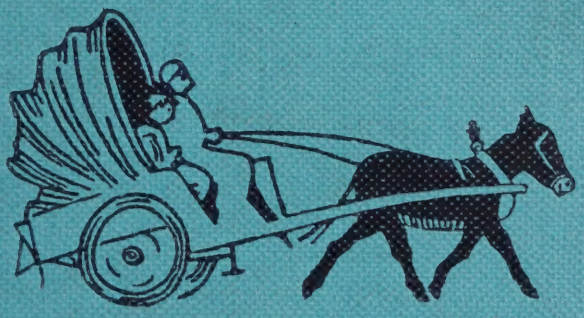
PRINCE OF THE PALE MOUNTAINS



PRINCE OF THE PALE MOUNTAINS

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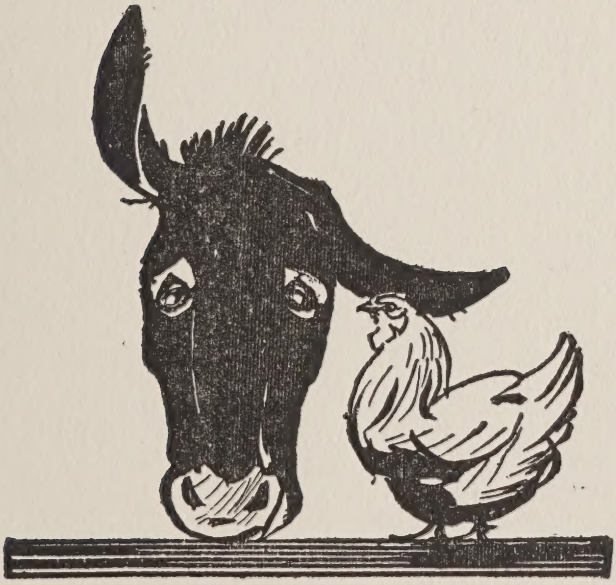
'THERE IS NOTHING MORE TO DO BUT BIND IT UP' (*page* 136)

PRINCE OF THE PALE MOUNTAINS

By
ANNE D. KYLE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MAGINEL WRIGHT BARNEY



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TO

LYDIA

WHO ALSO LOVES THE PALE MOUNTAINS

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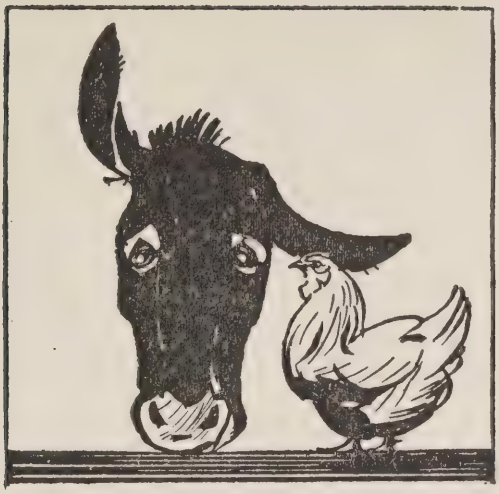
PRINCE OF THE PALE MOUNTAINS



PRINCE OF THE PALE MOUNTAINS

TO BEGIN WITH

FAR to the north lie the Pale Mountains.

Beyond the still lagoons of Venice, where gay-winged fisher boats dip like butterflies upon a field of flowers; beyond the Lombard Plain, where every road must stand upon a dike and every mouldy house on stilts, and fever steams all summer in the marshes; beyond the pretty River Valley that is ruled by the lines of many vineyards; beyond even the little towns where every church spire is a monstrous bubble and every house has pictures painted on its walls. Beyond all these are the Pale Mountains, so high and ghostly white among the lazy

summer clouds, they seem, not merely rock and pinnacle, but some glimmering enchanted City out of reach of mortal feet.

And once, indeed, they say, the fairies danced on moonlit nights upon those airy uplands, while dwarfs stood guard on Peak and Pass to take their toll of travelers who dared to cross those boundaries. Once the famous Dwarf King Laurin walked smiling in his Rose Garden at the set of sun.

(*'He who sees him walking there will never walk again, but will lie dead the morning after in the snow!'*)

And sometimes peasants hunting chamois high among the lonely peaks would come upon a group of Old Men nodding in a cave. Scarce more than half a meter high were they and wore their long beards looped about their waists to keep from tripping on them.

(*'He who sees them sleeping thus will never sleep again, but wander like a blown leaf on the mountain till he shrivels into dust.'*)

All this, however, happened very long ago. Today the fairies do not dance on moonlit nights, and travelers may cross the mountain passes unmolested save by wind and snow and bitter cold. The Dwarf King Laurin walks no more within his magic Rose Garden, though still at sunset time its rocks burn rosy pink against the western sky.

No, those days are gone; — and yet I've heard it said, by those who live year in and out beneath those glowing peaks, that now and then a man is born whose heart is warped and twisted as the dwarfs of old. And such a one takes toll in mischief of his fellow men as much as ever Laurin did of luckless travelers. But just as, soon or late, the heaviest cloud will melt away and the Pale Mountains stand forth again, serene and beautiful as ever, so in time his mischief deeds grow thin and powerless. The Pale Mountains have outlasted him as they have outlasted the dwarfs themselves before him.

And sometimes, too, is born a little child who has a gay and elfin heart within his breast. For him the Pale Mountains are an inheritance. Among their white and golden peaks there lies a kingdom waiting if he be wise and brave enough to look for it.

And I believe this must be true; — how otherwise should I have this tale of Peter the Red to tell you?

CHAPTER I

In which Peter the Red Sells Three Eggs and Buys Twelve Golden Buttons

Peter the Red went down the narrow village street. About him the sunset tinted the whole world pink, and, though he had not time to go and see, he knew that on the distant Pale Mountains a thousand roses would be magically blossoming. While Papa Ott' lived, Peter the Red had never missed that nightly miracle. Each evening they would stand to watch it, leaning against an ancient larch whose roots curled down like some great bird's claws over the edge of the vast Plateau on which they lived. Far below them lay the River Valley, ruled by the green lines of vineyards, and beyond that the little hills which summer laid with yellow wheat-field mats, and far, far beyond these the misty feet of the Pale Mountains.

But since the strange gray day when Papa Ott' went down the village street accompanied by chants

and candles and a priest to point the spot in Holy Field where he might lie in peace until the Resurrection, Peter the Red had had little time for sunset rose gardens. Maria Madelina, Papa Ott's niece, kept him too busy tending goats and gathering sticks and playing nurse to the seven little Maria Madelinas. For Maria Madelina, when Papa Ott' had died, had taken Peter home with her, along with Papa Ott's few bits of furniture, three copper pots, and the old cow, which had died, too, a week later. Maria Madelina had allowed Peter to take Penni with him also. Penni was the hen whom Papa Ott' had given to Peter when she was but a sickly chick.

Thinking of Penni now, Peter the Red slid his hand into his ragged pocket and three smooth eggs stirred gently at his touch. Three eggs! Penni's eggs! She had laid them in the hollow at the base of a scraggly pine a meadow's distance off from Maria Madelina's little pink house. Peter had laughed aloud the first time he discovered her hidden nest. So, Penni didn't want Maria Madelina to have her eggs! But she had not minded Peter. Indeed, she had hinted loudly as he was gathering sticks along the edge of the wood: '*Cocodè! Cocodè! Cocodè!*' and Peter had looked up sharply.

'What have you done now, Penni?'

But Penni only looked wise and sauntered off,

and presently she called back over her tail feathers: 'Look and *see!* Look and *see!*'

'I will,' said Peter, and he did. He found a beautiful warm egg lying in the depression Penni had made with her firm breast in last year's pine needles which the winter winds had sifted into the hollow of the tree. And the next day there was another, and on the next another, and so on.

Maria Madelina, of course, knew nothing about all this. Only this morning she had observed, in an ominous tone, that Penni ate more than her five hens and rooster put together and didn't even pay an egg of board! Peter the Red eyed, a trifle guiltily, Penni scratching about the kitchen floor, but when he spoke, it was to ask:

'Maria Madelina, when will your brother Berto come to visit you again?'

'The Saints keep him!' cried Maria Madelina. 'Berto is like the wind; you never know when it comes, until it is here. And for all he is my brother, I should prefer him not to blow in too often, for he is always hungry and I have enough mouths to fill as it is. But what do you want with Berto?'

'Nothing,' said Peter the Red. 'I merely wondered.'

Now he hurried along the village street, the three eggs in his pocket. The rose color was already fading in the sky and soon the dark would take its place.

Maria Madelina would be waiting for the loaf of bread she had sent him to buy, and he had an errand of his own first. He reached the little square which marked the center of the town. On one side stood the saffron-colored church, and opposite it the Town Hall, while between the two stood the inn with its name printed in great letters across the front, 'The Golden Eagle' — though Peter the Red could not read that, and privately thought it looked more like a ragged old crow than anything else, anyway. Nevertheless he respected its importance, for did not the bus from Venice stop every night at its door?

He crossed the square and, slipping around to the back of the inn, he stepped across a worn threshold into a dark enclosure which smelled of hay and manure. Something stamped nervously as he entered, and peering about he saw a long ear twitch above a straw-filled manger. So there was a guest at the inn to-night! That was good, for then Signorina Ida would without doubt take the eggs he cuddled in his pocket as she had always taken the others he had brought her. He went over to welcome the owner of the ear. There was a woof of warm breath against his arm as he brought his hand down over a shaggy nose and he felt soft lips nuzzle at his palm. 'No, I have nothing, greedy one!' He laughed. The donkey was the tiniest he had ever seen, scarcely bigger, he thought, than an overgrown rabbit. Near by,

Peter noticed a small hooded cart, its shafts tilted up, drawn into a corner beside a pile of hay. The donkey stamped regretfully as Peter with a final pat left him and went on into the steaming kitchen where Signorina Ida was preparing supper. Signorina Ida was tall and thin, and as she moved about she looked like an elongated shadow of somebody else which candlelight had thrown upon the wall.

'Good-evening,' said Peter to the shadow.

Signorina Ida turned with a little shriek, her hand raised to cross herself, but when she saw who it was, she dropped it.

'Oh, Peter Rosso, how you frightened me! What can I do for you? Hurry, for you must see I am very busy just now.'

Peter the Red advanced and laid his precious eggs upon the table.

'Here are more eggs for you, Signorina Ida,' and tilting his head he gazed up into her face anxiously, for he was always afraid that perhaps this time she would say she did not need them.

But she only smiled, her kind thin shadow of a smile, and went to lift down a little jug from a shelf so high that Maria Madelina, who was of no small size herself, would have had to stand upon the bench to reach it. Peter looked after her admiringly. Even Papa Ott', who had never had any use for women, had said once that Signorina Ida was different. She

was a woman among women. She was in some ways almost as good as a man! She could run an inn, and clean out a stable and drive a hard bargain, as well as any man, so that she had never needed to get married. Also she did not have any children sprawling over the stone floor. If only, thought Peter, Maria Madelina were as excellent!

Signorina Ida turned the jug upside down on the table and out came an avalanche of money. Peter's eyes never failed to pop at the sight. Fancy having enough money to make an avalanche! He watched fascinated as she selected a dirty scrap of a bill and waved him to come and get it.

'There!' and, as he stared at it incredulously, 'Does that not please you, Peter Rosso?'

It was five lire she had put into his hand. A five-lire note, torn in two and pasted together again, but good for all that. Five lire for three eggs? Ah, but Papa Ott' had been right — Signorina Ida *was* a woman among women!

She stuffed the avalanche back into the jug and set it on its shelf again. 'Tell me, what do you do with all your money, little Peter?'

'I save it,' he told her, 'until Maria Madelina's brother, who runs the lift in the hotel at Venice, returns for a visit. Then I shall go back with him and help him with it, for it is very heavy, especially when many foreigners are squeezed into it. Only, he says,

I must have gold buttons on my coat if I do that. It is the custom. And gold buttons cost money ——'

'Oh, ho,' said Signorina Ida, making a great noise with her pots and pans. 'So that is how the wind blows. But why should you wish to leave us, Peter Rosso? Are you not well fed at Maria Madelina's ——'

'Oh, I have as much as the rest. But where there are so many mouths to fill and always another one arrives ——' Peter rolled resigned eyes heavenward. The last little Maria Madelina was not yet three weeks old. 'How can one be sure there will not be another next month, too? Besides,' he added confidentially, 'I am sick of living with a woman!'

'So-o?' Signorina Ida drew a spoonful of *minestrone* from the pot and tasted it. 'Where, then, is Lucio?'

'Lucio!' cried Peter. 'Lucio is only Maria Madelina's husband and does not count. He never opens his mouth before her, except to eat! Before, there was only Papa Ott' and myself — two men together. Why, Papa Ott' would not even let Maria Madelina inside the door! Only when he could no longer stop her did she come. Still, I suppose,' he conceded, trying to be fair, 'Maria Madelina cannot help being a woman.'

Signorina Ida smiled at him over her shoulder. 'I, too, am a woman, little Peter.'

Peter the Red hastened to reassure her. 'One would never think it, Signorina Ida. You are every bit as good as a man.'

'I have had to be,' said Signorina Ida grimly. 'Listen, Peter Rosso, I would not set my heart too much on Berto's words, if I were you. I have known him from a boy, and often he says more than he means. He likes to tease.'

'This was not teasing,' Peter shook his head. 'He promised it by Saint Mark himself.'

'Certainly one should not make mock of the Saints.' She gave him a gentle shove. 'Run along into the other room, Peter. There is a guest in there, and I think he is one of the Romany folk who go up and down this country in the spring. I should not be a bit surprised if he had gold buttons in that pack of his. See if I am not right, Peter, while I finish my work, for at any moment now the bus will be here, and who knows but what the King himself may step down and demand food and lodging! It would not be the first time that Royalty has stopped here! Why, barely two hundred years ago — but run along now, for I know you've heard the tale before.'

So, nothing loath, Peter the Red stepped into the large high-ceilinged public room of the inn. His heart had begun to trip with excitement, and to cover his agitation he clutched his five lire more tightly, and swaggered a bit as he said in a lordly voice:

'Have you any gold buttons to sell, my man?'

The guest did not move. He sat with his feet propped up on a table and his stubby brown hands folded comfortably over his stomach. There was something about him that reminded Peter of Papa Ott'. Perhaps it was the twinkle that danced a continual jig in the corner of his eyes; or perhaps it was the stray patches on his shabby coat; or even the way he smoked his long-stemmed pipe — yes, he was most certainly like Papa Ott'.

At last the little man removed his pipe from under his shaggy mustache and nodded: 'Look and see for yourself, Signore.' And he jerked a thumb toward a shabby box with straps on the sides, which stood in a near-by corner.

Peter's eyes glinted and he forgot to swagger even though he had just been called 'Signore' as if he were grown-up and a gentleman. He darted across the room and knelt before the box.

The little man turned to watch him, forgetting to put his pipe back, and presently he scratched his shaggy head.

'Now who,' he grumbled to himself, 'and why, and when, and where?'

But Peter the Red did not listen. He was drawing out the topmost drawer in the box with an awed finger, but when he had peeped inside, he grunted with disappointment. It was full of women's things!

Thimbles and thread and tape and needles. He tried the next. That was full of holy medals, Saint Anthony and Saint Christopher and Saint Florian, all in neat and shiny rows — not to mention several of the Blessed Lady herself. Peter's hand went absently to his neck and fingered the dirty string that hung about it. He had a Blessed Lady all his own, safe within a thin silver locket, and only he and Papa Ott' knew that She was lovelier than the blue-and-white Madonna the village folk burned candles to in the saffron-colored church. 'Only the one in the church can work miracles,' Peter had said once regretfully; and Papa Ott' had looked long and oddly at Peter the Red before he answered: 'Wear yours always, little Peter, perhaps — who knows — She too may some day work a miracle for you....'

'Try the second from the bottom, boy,' suggested the little man, breaking in upon Peter's trance.

Peter the Red did so, and, peering into the second from the bottom, cried out in delight. For here at last were buttons. All kinds and conditions of buttons. White and black and piebald and bone and wood and gold. Gold! His finger shook as he touched them. They were far more glittering than those which Berto wore. He could see himself standing in the lift, and outshining Berto....

With a valiant effort he managed to speak carelessly: 'How much for these, my man?'

The other, however, seemed bemused. One hand still rubbed through his hair perplexedly. At last he said, as if he were repeating something he had long since forgotten:

'"Hair like a Saint's halo, and a dimple on the neck as if an angel had kissed him there." Now, who said that and how long ago?... Those buttons are fifty centesimi each and cheap at that.'

'Too much,' said Peter promptly, not because he thought so, but because one should always bargain before one buys, and he started to rise from his heels as if he had lost all interest in the buttons.

'I might,' observed the little man, still frowning, 'make you a price if you wanted more than one.... "A dimple at the nape of the neck!..." It's been a long time ago that I heard it... How do they call you, boy?'

'Peter Rosso.' Peter rubbed at the back of his neck where a red gold curl tickled it. 'I'll give you five lire for twelve,' he offered, and instantly regretted having set his price so quickly. But the buttons had winked enticingly at him.

'Peter Rosso,' mused the peddler; 'Peter the Red. Now does that help or doesn't it? If only my wife, the Gypsy Woman, were here, she would know,' and he wagged his head regretfully.

'It is because of my hair that I am called that,' Peter explained, his eyes still on the buttons. 'I am

Papa Ott's son. But he is dead now and I have to live with Maria Madelina.' And suddenly the back of his eyes began to ache, and he had to close them until the pain should stop.

'Papa Ott'? No, I'm sure I never heard that name before. Tell me, have you lived anywhere else but on this Plateau?'

Peter shook his head. 'Except during the Bad Days, of course.' By that he meant the War which had driven every one out of this northern hill country to the flat safe plains farther south. 'But I was too little to remember them.'

'Hmph,' said the little man, and taking his feet down from the table he rose, lifted the box up in their place and began to count out twelve buttons. 'Well, if you are this Papa Ott's son, it must have been somebody else I was told to look for. "Hair like a Saint's halo." It was somewhere in the Pale Mountains I heard it — I'd take my oath on that. Though who —' he shook his head, 'but I'll remember the moment we meet again no doubt. I always do. Here, boy, hold out your palm.'

'The Pale Mountains?' Peter the Red almost forgot to count the glittering discs dropping one by one into his hand. 'Have you been among the Pale Mountains, then?'

'Many a time,' said the little man, 'nine — ten. In fact I'm on my way there now, after I go to the

Valley Fair. Eleven — twelve. Where's your five lire?'

Peter the Red paid it over, his fingers letting it go reluctantly, but his mind was still too full of what the little man had said to regret it overmuch.

'I have always wanted to see the Pale Mountains,' he said. 'Papa Ott' used to say when it thundered that the dwarfs were building me a castle over there and I should go some day and find it. Tell me — have you ever seen a dwarf?'

The other shook his head. 'Of course I would not like to say I doubted your Papa Ott's word, but it's my impression the dwarfs vanished years ago, whenever the first mortal came climbing over the Pass. Still, of course I may be mistaken. My wife, the Gypsy Woman, always used to insist there were

some left hiding high up among the cloudiest peaks...'

In came Signorina Ida, a bowl of *minestrone* in her hands, and all at once Peter remembered that Maria Madelina had sent him out for bread. He thrust his precious buttons into his pocket and made for the door.

'Oh, Peter,' Signorina Ida called after him. 'Saint Mark is favoring you. The bus has just come and some one who looked very much like Berto got out of it.'

A little while later, the bread tucked under his arm, Peter the Red came panting up to Maria Madelina's house. He heard festive sounds within. Signorina Ida had been right, Berto had returned, and he, Peter, would show him the golden buttons, and to-morrow, perhaps, or the next day, they would go away, two men together...

Maria Madelina looked up as he entered and began to scold him for being so late, but he closed his ears and walking over placed himself beside Berto, who lounged before the fire. Lucio was there, too, but Lucio, being only Maria Madelina's husband, did not count.

'Berto,' said Peter in a low tone and quickly, as one man to another, 'I have the golden buttons, and I am ready to start whenever you like.'

Berto gave him an uncomprehending stare.

'Maria Madelina,' he said over his shoulder, 'has this brat gone mad? What's all this nonsense about golden buttons?'

'You said I must have them to run the lift,' whispered Peter desperately in Berto's ear. This was no way for one man to treat another — betraying his affairs to a woman! 'You promised the last time you were here, by Saint Mark ——'

Suddenly Berto threw back his head and shouted. 'Oh, Maria, my sister!' he gasped. 'Do you hear what the boy says? He has believed every word I said about those buttons. Oh, ho, ho!' and he held his sides and bent double with laughter, while Peter watched him, unsmiling. On his outstretched hand he held his golden buttons. Presently one of them fell through his fingers and rolled across the floor, but Peter did not even look after it.

'Was ever such a joke?' giggled Berto, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. 'Gold buttons! To help me run the lift! Ho!' He dug at Peter with his elbow. 'That joke is funnier than you know, Peter, for I myself do not intend to run the lift again, buttons or no buttons. No, indeed, they have not treated me at that hotel as I, Berto, should be treated, and so I have snapped my fingers at them — like that! Psst! Oh, ho, ho, ho!'

'Shut up, Berto; there is nothing so much to laugh about.' Maria Madelina's voice broke in upon his

mirth. At the sound Peter jumped, and the rest of his buttons fell to the floor and went rolling off in all directions.

'Peter!' screamed Maria Madelina, her hands on her great hips. 'Where did you get those buttons, eh? How have you money for such foolishness, eh? Stole it from me, did you, you little cheat? — and after all I've done for you, too!'

'I did not steal it,' denied Peter. 'The money was mine, Maria Madelina. Signorina Ida gave it to me for Penni's eggs, because her own hens were not laying, and ——'

'So that is why I have had no eggs from that fowl! You have been stealing them, have you? Very well, to-morrow your hen goes into the pot! We'll have enough to eat for once around here ——'

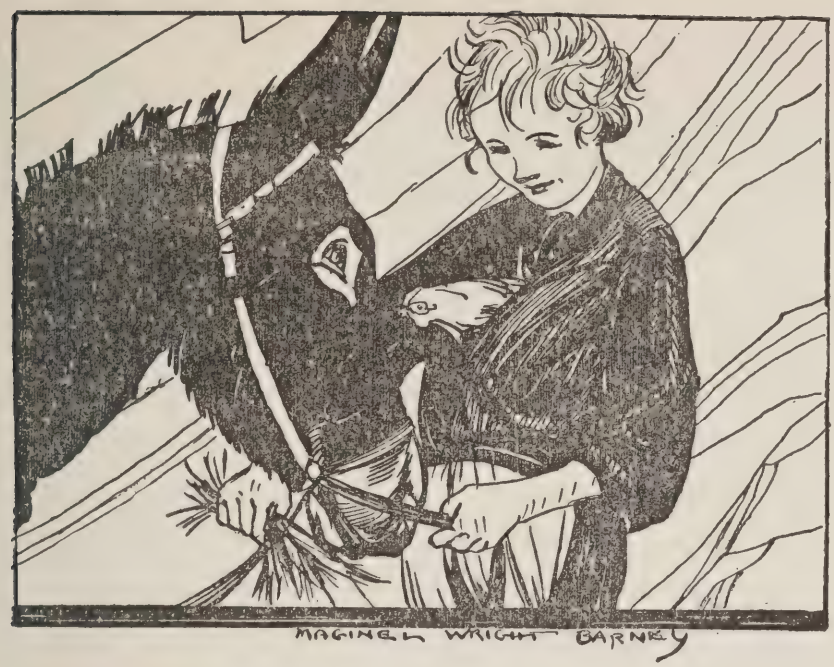
'No! *No!*' screamed Peter, and he threw himself upon Maria Madelina and beat her with his fists. 'Don't you dare touch Penni! She is mine! Papa Ott' gave her to me!'

'Get away from me.' Maria Madelina was shaking him. '*Papa* Ott', indeed! Why, he was not your father any more than I am! There's been quite enough of pretense around here when foundlings beat their betters and say they will have this and won't have that! Would you like to know where you came from, Peter the Red? Listen, then, while I tell you! You came out of a basket which some one had

dropped by the roadside when they fled south during the Bad Days! And Papa Ott' found you and picked you out and let you think you were his. Now, what have you to say to that, you impudent, ungrateful, nameless piece of rubbish?'

But Peter the Red had nothing to say. With arms across his face he fled, stumbling, out into the night and down the road toward the little Holy Field where Papa Ott' slept in his appointed place. There he threw himself upon the soft mound and sobbed his terror out upon the silent breast of Earth.

Behind him in the house, Berto still laughed, and Lucio sat in his corner saying nothing, and Maria Madelina was down on her knees gathering up the golden buttons, for they would look very well on the dress she was to wear at her latest baby's christening.



CHAPTER II

In which Peter the Red Meets Walter the Romany and Botto Gets his Name

Peter the Red crouched beneath the ancient larch which curled its roots where the Plateau dropped downward to the River Valley, and cuddled Penni to his lean young breast.

It was barely dawn. Below him the little penciled lines of vineyards were as snug beneath their cloud blankets as — or so he devoutly hoped — Maria Madelina was beneath her red-fringed coverlet. If he looked down, he could trace the outlines of a narrow road that edged fearfully along the face of the giant cliff. If he looked up, he could see the distant

pinnacles of the Pale Mountains, all gold and clear, rising like fairy islands from a misty sea.

But Peter the Red looked neither up nor down, but only straight ahead, and despair was the cloud that shadowed the usual morning brightness of his eyes. For what was he do to? And where to go that Maria Madelina could not seek him out? Why, even at this moment she might be coming through the larch woods after him. For Maria Madelina was not one to let such a meal as Penni would provide slip easily from her mouth. And at the thought he gave the feathers which lay so soft and warm against his shoulder a convulsive squeeze.

Penni croaked unhappily. And, indeed, she had good cause to protest. To be snatched rudely out of tranquil slumber; to be dragged from one's accustomed perch above the door — even when one loved the hands that did it; and finally to be borne out into a dark and chilly world and squeezed until one's very feathers pricked — surely it was enough to upset the simplest hen! And still complaining to herself she cocked a doleful eye over Peter's arm and hoped to sight some breakfast.

But Peter the Red had no ear for Penni's plaints, being too thoroughly occupied with his own. What, oh, what was he to do? He did not know the way to Venice alone, and even if he did — Maria Madelina had kept his golden buttons, and the three lire he

still had, of what Signorina Ida had previously given him for his eggs, would scarcely buy more buttons and his fare, too. Should he take refuge with Signorina Ida? For a brief instant he seemed to see bending above him her kind thin shadow of a smile. Then he shook his head with a sigh. If he went there, Maria Madelina would only find it out and tell the priest, and the priest would come and send him back, as last night he had lifted him from Papa Ott's grave and sent him away with the admonition that he would lie soon enough in Holy Field, without coming there of his own accord. No, Signorina Ida's would not do. But where, then? He could not stay forever in the woods. So his thoughts tossed up and down as below him in the Valley the morning mists were boiling like some strange and foamy sea. 'Oh, Papa, Papa Ott', if only you had not gone to Holy Field!' And suddenly the terrible ache in his heart welled up into his throat so that he could not breathe. A tear started down his nose. He raised a finger to push it away, at which Penni, feeling his hold relax, cackled joyfully and, hopping out of his arms, legged it after a luckless beetle.

'Penni!' Peter started after her. 'Penni, come back, or Maria Madelina may find you and put you into her pot.'

'Awk,' said Penni, and gobbled the beetle as Peter reached for her tail feathers. Then she side-

stepped adroitly and gobbled another, cocking one bright eye at him to see what he would say to that.

But Peter's attention had been caught away by something else. Listening a moment intently, he ran back to the edge of the Plateau and peeped over. From the depths of the cottony fog there rose a curious creaking noise, which grew momently louder. Some one was driving along the steep road to the Valley. All at once, the creaking stopped, and up through the fog came a man's voice, urging and expostulating. In spite of his anxiety, Peter grinned — who but a donkey could stand unmoved under such epithets?...

Suddenly Peter the Red sprang to his feet and shouted aloud. Then he swooped down upon the complacent Penni and, pinioning her under one arm, struggled to undo the belt which held his ragged shirt in a ruffle about his waist. He shoved Penni inside and buckled the strap again very tightly so she could not fall out. Penni's head popped out of the open V at his neck and gave an indignant squawk. If he had not been in so great a hurry, he could have stopped to laugh at the outraged look on her bill. But as it was, he only began to ease himself downward cautiously over the edge of the cliff, first a toehold and then a handhold; a handhold and again a toehold, down and down. Penni's eyes popped for fright and she made motions inside his

blouse as if she were treading water. A little mischief wind, up with the sun, had begun to tear the morning mists to pieces, and their tattered remnants whipped against his face and seemed to suffocate him, while he groped about blindly for his foot's next resting-place.

Yet, for all that, as he climbed, a fierce joy surged through him. Let Maria Madelina come now if she wished! Let her dance upon the edge and shriek — he would only snap his fingers up at her and laugh. For Maria Madelina, with her girth, could never follow him down this cliff, and by the time she had lumbered around by the road he ought to be well on his way to the Valley; and clinging to a young larch tree, which had also found a foothold on the rocks, he shouted anxiously through the breaking clouds.

'Ho, there!' roared an answering voice. 'Come and lend me a hand with this accursed donkey.'

Peter chuckled.

'I was right, Penni. It *is* the man who was at Signorina Ida's. Now, why didn't I think of him before?' And when the clouds parted a little and showed him how the road lay just below, he let go of the larch and ran the rest of the way, bringing up panting under the donkey's nose.

'Holy Saint Christopher!' cried the little man, peering out of the wagon at him. 'Why have You

sent me a boy, when even I, a man, cannot make this donkey move?' And he wagged his head at Heaven reproachfully. Then he raised his stick to belabor the little beast again. But Peter, springing forward, caught it in his hands and held it.

'Don't do that. If you hit him hard enough, he might start ——'

'And that is just what I hope he will do, boy! Do you think I wish to spend my life on this hill? Let go.'

But Peter the Red persisted, for the mist that blinded him had not misled that sense of direction which Papa Ott' had cultivated in him when they used to walk together through a cloud-bank to find the cow and lead her home. Instinctively, he had noted that the cart was facing away from the cliff down which he had climbed and that therefore the donkey must be headed direct for the edge of space. No doubt the many steep turns and the dense fog had confused the little man so that he no longer knew which direction he was driving in. The donkey had stopped just in time; a few more creaking turns of the wheel and the cart and all would have gone crashing into the Valley below. And then and there Peter had a crafty inspiration.

'If you will only put that stick down,' he said, 'I think I might make your donkey to go.'

'You might?' The little man peered down at him

doubtfully. But he lowered the stick and propped it between his knees. 'After all,' he admitted, 'if it hadn't been for a Child the good Christopher would never have become a Saint. So perhaps he knows what he is doing, sending me a child, too. At any rate, we shall see.' And he settled back with the air of one who waits to be shown.

But Peter did not move. 'If I do,' he asked, 'what will I get in return?'

'So-ho,' the little man chuckled. 'You have a tongue for business, I see. Very well, you may have whatever you want out of my wagon, provided, of course, that you don't want too much.'

'Thank you.' Peter the Red smiled slyly to himself. This was exactly what he had hoped for. Then he rubbed the donkey's soft gray nose and scratched its shaggy forehead between its frightened eyes. He bent and snatched a handful of fog-wet grass from the roadside, and so, gently, very gently he coaxed the tiny beast around. For Peter the Red had a way with animals, as Papa Ott' in the old days had often told him. Just then Penni, craning her neck through the V of Peter's shirt, picked a fly, too soaked to move, from the donkey's neck.

'Awk,' said Penni, and swallowed it.

'Oof,' said the donkey, with a jump that kicked all the stiffness out of his stubborn little legs.

'Ai, boy!' cried the little man, holding on to the

seat, 'I want the donkey to go forward, not up and down!'

'Then you should have headed him properly,' retorted Peter. 'For assuredly, if he had not balked, he and you and the cart as well would have gone over the edge. So-o, little one,' he soothed the donkey softly. 'There was nothing to fear — only that foolish Penni after a fly. And look, there is the road, safe ahead of you,' as the clouds thinned once more.

'It was the fog,' the little man tried to excuse himself. 'I have never driven through worse. In truth, it was Saint Christopher that sent you — So-ho,' as Peter came and leaned against the wheel, 'if it is not the same boy I sold those buttons to last night — and for a song too!'

'No, not for a song,' said Peter bitterly, thinking of what Maria Madelina had said to him. 'And, besides, I — I did not have them very long.'

'You lost them so soon, boy? Well, you have done me a good turn and I can be generous. Go now and pick out for yourself as many more gold buttons as there are Holy Apostles and for good measure you may even count in Judas Iscariot. What, doesn't that please you? How about a medal, then? I have most excellent ones of Saint Christopher, who is the patron saint of travelers like me. Why, you are as hard to please as a gentleman! What will you have?'

'I ——' Peter had opened his mouth to tell what he would have when suddenly a man's voice interrupted from above;

'Oooh! You down there! Hooo!'

At the sound, Peter's blood stiffened in his veins, and his knees grew so weak he had to hold hard to the wheel.

'What's the matter?' asked the little man. 'You look as if it were the Devil himself that called.'

'Oh, no,' whispered Peter, 'not the Devil — much worse. It is Berto, come to look for me.'

It had not occurred to him that Berto might come and not Maria Madelina. And Berto was a different sort to reckon with. He could come down that cliff almost as easily as Peter himself had done, for Berto was as much like a ferret as Maria Madelina was like a cow.

The little man looked at him shrewdly. 'You've run away from home, I take it.'

'No,' denied Peter; 'I have no home now that Papa Ott' is dead. And Maria Madelina only wishes me back so that I can work for her... and also that she may eat Penni.' His eyes filled.

'Hm-m,' said the other. 'Now I remember I have heard somewhat on that subject from Signorina Ida last night ——' he reached out and gave Peter a little push. 'Get into the back of the wagon, boy,' he whispered, 'and keep still.'

Peter the Red scrambled in as he was told, and, kneeling excitedly on several bolts of woolen cloth, he put his eye to a crack in the wooden side of the cart. A cloud which a moment before had enveloped them passed on its way skyward, and suddenly there was Berto quite visible, peering over the edge of the Plateau.

'Are you deaf?' he called down angrily. 'I have shouted myself hoarse and you pay no more attention than if I were the wind howling!'

'And how was I to know you were not?' called back the little man; 'for certainly there was nothing to be seen but cloud! And I was brought up to answer no voice that I couldn't see who made it, but instead to say a *Pater Noster* quickly, for ten chances to one it was nothing mortal that called.'

'Well, now you've said your *Pater Noster*,' retorted Berto sarcastically, 'perhaps you will answer me.'

The little man shrugged. 'That depends. What thing do you want? I am in a hurry to be on my way.'

'A boy,' called Berto through the funnel of his hands. 'Have you passed a boy this morning? He has stolen one of my sister's hens and run away.'

'A boy? I *pass* a boy?' The little man scratched his head and appeared to ruminate. 'No,' he said at

last, 'I have passed nothing, unless it be too much time talking with you!' And at that he prodded the donkey's rump and away went the little wagon with a jerk that rolled Peter the Red off backward to the floor, while behind them Berto's shouts grew fainter and died away.

'Well,' said the little man presently when there still was no sound from the interior of his cart, 'have you fallen out? Or are you so busy choosing yourself a gift, you can say nothing?'

'I have been recovering myself.' Peter the Red crawled up on the seat beside him. 'And as for the gift you offered, you have already paid me twice over.' And he could not help looking a little regretful, for now the thing he had had in his mind to ask for would be a favor rather than payment; and favors were harder to ask... or get.

'There was something you were about to say,' encouraged the other, 'when that Berto interrupted. I have a curiosity to hear it. I like one who can drive a fair bargain, boy, and besides I am still, *I* think, a little in your debt, since it was my life you saved, and I only your happiness.'

'Perhaps it is the same thing,' said Peter, kicking shyly at the seat he sat on.

'The same, and not the same. For one may lose one's happiness and yet find it again later; but when one's life is gone, there's nothing more that can be

hoped for. Tell me, what was it you wished to ask of me?'

'It was only — a seat beside you in your cart ——'

'A seat in my cart? But that is easily given — particularly if we go in the same direction. Where are you bound for, boy?'

'Bound for?' Peter the Red shook his head. 'I am not bound for anywhere at all, for there is no one I belong to any more.' And suddenly the donkey's bobbing back and the road and even the little man's face above him grew blurred as if he gazed at them through water.

'But I thought last night you said you were Papa Ott's son.'

'Last night is not to-day,' said Peter. 'To-day I am not Papa Ott's son nor ever shall be again. And who I am I do not know unless...' He reached out a hesitating finger and touched the other's sleeve. 'There was something you said, last night, about hair like mine...'

'"Hair like a Saint's halo,"' quoted the other, '"and a dimple at the back of the neck as if an angel had kissed him there." Why?'

'Because — I did not say so last night, for then I thought I was Papa Ott's son — but I have a dimple there, just as you said.' And he bent his head forward so that the little man might look for himself beneath the clustering curls.

'Saint Christopher save me, so you have! Now, what might that mean?' And he scratched his head so fiercely that the hair stood up all over it.

'That *I* am the boy you were looking for!' answered Peter triumphantly. 'That is why I wish you to take me with you. See,' as the other continued to rub his head as if in doubt, 'I have three lire that will help to pay my way and Penni can lay us eggs to eat.'

'Mm, I don't know. Still it mightn't be such a bad idea at that. I have long thought I could use a boy to watch the cart while I take my box upon my back and go from door to door. Besides, I find it lonely sometimes, since my wife, the Gypsy Woman, left me. The hen, though — that's a different matter. I never knew one yet that would lay an egg when you asked it of her, and a peddler's cart is scarcely a poultry farm, you know. She'd need to be fed, and, besides, she'd walk all over everything.'

'If there were only an old box you did not need,' suggested Peter, his face falling — for without Penni, of course, he could not go — 'I would make her a nest to sit in, and as for food, she can get along very well on the crumbs we drop while eating, and the worms she can scratch up. She's very fond of beetles, too. And she lays lots of eggs, truly. If you will only take her, I promise you that she will pay her fare.'

'Well, we'll know that in a day or two,' returned

the other, clucking to his donkey, who had taken this opportunity to slow up and browse on the bushes by the roadside. 'Meanwhile you had better let her out, boy. She'll be having cramps in her legs, tied up like that in your blouse.'

So Peter the Red unbuckled the strap which held poor patient Penni imprisoned and she hopped out on the seat and shook herself and wiped her bill. The little man, drawing out his long pipe and lighting it, looked on with twinkling eyes.

'How did you say last night that you were called, boy?' He turned to Peter presently.

'Peter the Red — but that is on account of my hair ——'

'Peter the Red will do well enough, until you find a better name, anyway. And your hen, you say, is called "Feathers"? That is a good name for a fowl, if a fowl must have a name.'

'I said Pen-*nee*, not Pen-*nay*,' corrected Peter. 'I think "Feathers" would be a foolish name. One might as well call her "Toes" or "Beak!"'

'But I never heard of such a name as Penni. Why do you call her so?'

'Because ——' began Peter the Red and stopped, for he did not know the answer. On the day that Papa Ott' had first put the tiny fluff of feathers in his hands and asked, 'How will you call her, little Peter?' he had answered promptly, 'Penni,' and had

even stopped to wonder how it was he knew a hen should be called just that. 'Because,' he said vaguely at last, 'everything must have a name to be called by, just as a cup has a handle so you can pick it up.' And he added, 'What Saint are you named for, by the way?'

The little man chuckled. 'No Saint at all, little Peter, but a great singer, Walther von der Vogelweide, one who used to go from house to house in olden days, making fair songs for people's entertainment. A Minnesinger they called him, and often in winter evenings, when I was a boy like you, have I heard my father repeat the songs and stories he used to tell. My father it was who named me for him! Walter — Walter the Romany they call me now.'

'And how do you call your donkey, Walter Romany?'

'Blockhead, cabbage, scum of the earth — it depends,' said Walter the Romany. 'Now this morning I could think of nothing bad enough! If you don't like any of those,' he suggested as Peter said nothing, 'you may name him to suit yourself. Come, let us hear it!'

'Botto,' said Peter the Red after a moment's reflection.

'Saint Florian!' cried the little man, '*and* Saint Christopher, to mention no others — who ever heard of such a name for a donkey?'

But Peter the Red saw nothing odd about the name. He had named him — but he did not know why he had named him. Only for some mysterious reason he knew that Botto was as surely a name for a donkey as Penni was for a hen. It was strange, but it was so.

All this time they had been rattling downhill, while the broken clouds went past them on their way skyward, and below the penciled lines of vineyards grew clearer and greener with every turn of the wheels. At last they were down, and the road lay before them like a straight white ribbon tying the little vineyards together. Peter the Red looked back. Behind him rose a great dark wall against the blueness of the morning sky. It was the Plateau which until last night he thought had always been his home. He wondered if Berto was still hanging over the edge looking for him, and he could not help laughing to himself at the idea, while his fingers smoothed Penni's soft back beside him. Yet almost at once his laughter turned to a sigh. For all he was glad to be quit of Berto and Maria Madelina, it gave him a desolate feeling to know there was no house now that he could go back to; no one to welcome him home at night.

'Oh, Walter Romany,' he said to the little man beside him, 'when do you think you will remember who it was that said those words to you about me?'

'When the time comes, little Peter, never you fear. And that will not be before — unless I am very much mistaken — we reach the Pale Mountains.'

'The Pale Mountains!' Peter the Red lifted a face alight with eagerness to the warm sky ahead. 'But, Walter Romany, where are they? Only this morning I saw them — and now they are gone!'

'We have come down into the River Valley since, and in a valley even a very little hill can hide a mountain. Look, I will show you something.' He pointed to the farthest line of hills. 'Yonder lies the Gateway to the Pale Mountains. When we pass through that ——'

'Oh, Walter Romany! I can hardly see the hour!' cried Peter, by which he meant he could hardly bear to wait, and he drummed his heels so hard against the seat that Penni lost her balance and regained it only by a mighty flapping of wings.

'Patience,' advised the little man when the excitement had subsided. 'There is all summer for the Pale Mountains. And do not break my cart or we will get nowhere! First we stop at the Valley Town where they hold each year the Valley Fair. It lasts for six full days, and there you will see such marvels as will make the Pale Mountains seem very pale, indeed.' He laughed at Peter's look of disbelief. 'Wait till you lay eyes on the Carrousel, and the Lottery, and the little booths that sell spiced-cake

bears and pussy-cats so luscious that to look at them will make your mouth water. Yes, the Fair is a great time. Even the mountain folk come down to it unless the passes be too full of snow. You'll have to coop your hen up carefully there, for there'll be no time to waste in running after her.' He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. 'There's a box, that once had cups and saucers in it, you may have if you like.'

Late that afternoon, they came in sight of the Valley Town and made their camp in a friendly chestnut grove outside the walls. 'To-morrow,' said Walter Romany, 'we will drive in very early and pick ourselves a good spot for the Fair.'

'Why not now?' demanded Peter, for he had never seen so large a town as this even from the outside and was keen to enter it.

'It will give me time to look about a little and choose my spot first. And to-morrow when every one is sleeping we'll go and claim it. This isn't the first time I've been to the Valley Fair, little Peter!'

So after supper Walter Romany sauntered off into the Town and Peter, left in charge of the cart, stared after him gloomily. To-morrow seemed a thousand years away. So also, when he came to think of it, did yesterday. Yesterday, why, yesterday meant Berto laughing, and Maria Madelina, her fat hands on her hips, bellowing, and Papa Ott' still and cold

in Holy Field.... In her new coop, Penni cawked gently. Peter bent to stroke her soft feathers.

'Penni,' he whispered, 'don't forget to pay your fare to-morrow morning!' But Penni, being fast asleep, did not answer.

CHAPTER III

Wherein the Villain Comes in and Goes out Again

Very early the next morning, before the first bird had twittered in the chestnut branches above them, or Dawn with her shining scissors had begun to cut the eastern horizon and divide the day from night, Walter the Romany's little cart went clattering into the Great Square of the Town.

Peter's eyes, that had been drooping drowsily, opened wide with sudden interest. As he had never seen a town so large before, so he had never been in a square so big! The little *piazza* he was used to would have fitted into one corner of it; the saffron-colored church would barely have reached to the eaves of this one, whose shadowy mass took up one whole side of the square; and beside the huge hotel opposite, Signorina Ida's humble inn would have escaped notice utterly.

Walter Romany picked the spot he had the evening before decided on, and unhitched his donkey.

'Finish your sleep if you like,' he told Peter the Red, 'for there is nothing more to be done until the Three Sisters wake.'

'What three sisters?' But Walter Romany would give him no satisfaction, and presently Peter the Red forgot to wonder, for, curled up on the seat with his head against the side of the cart, he was dreaming that he climbed down an endless precipice with Penni in her new coop balanced on his head, the way Maria Madelina carried her water pot to the fountain. Presently Penni began to cackle, 'Look what I've laid! Look what I've laid!' — 'Oh, Penni, let me see!' And he stopped climbing to feel about in the nest, which to his joyful surprise was full of eggs! And still Penni kept cackling louder and louder, 'Look what I've laid! Look what I've laid!' until it became a sort of tolling; 'LOOK — WHAT — I'VE — LAID!' 'LOOK — WHAT — I'VE ——'

Peter straightened up and opened his eyes. All about him the crisp air was gray and full of sound. It rolled and billowed about him as the night mists in the valley. It washed up against the high-peaked houses like waves against the shore, and the houses sent it rolling back. Peter felt his head begin to ring and roll, too, and he put both hands over his ears and looked around for Walter Romany.

The latter regarded him with twinkly eyes above his morning pipe. 'So you know who the Three Sisters are now, eh?' he called above the tumult, and pointed upward at the church tower, where in the belfry Peter the Red could make out three great bells wagging back and forth. 'Every day they wake both Earth and Heaven with their clacking. Listen!'

The last peal rolled away, and under the steep roofs shutters banged open, bars were withdrawn, squeaking, from heavy doors, footsteps went pattering through the hitherto silent streets. Earth, indeed, was awake. And as for Heaven ——

There was a flicker of candlelights behind the stained-glass windows of the church, and presently there rose the deep slow chant of the morning's service.

No, there was no one but was awake. In the recesses of the cart, Peter the Red heard Penni stirring delicately, talking to herself in a soft undertone. Remembering his dream, he peeped into the nest. There was not the slightest sign of an egg in it.

'Oh, Penni,' he told her reproachfully, 'please don't be stubborn when so much depends on it!'

But Penni only cackled, as if to say, 'I can't lay an egg if I don't feel like it, can I?' and she stepped out of the nest and hopped up on the seat, where she began to preen her feathers.

'But how else, if she won't lay eggs, is she to pay her fare?' Peter asked himself in despair. The question still lay like a weight on his chest when Walter Romany sent him off presently to buy a loaf of bread and some goat's milk for breakfast. And when, as they stood together eating it, on the sunny side of the wagon, Walter Romany wiped the foam of milk from his mustache and said, with a jerk of his thumb, 'You'll have to teach your hen better manners, little Peter — I found her scratching for worms on a bolt of my best cloth,' Peter the Red's heart grew very heavy, indeed.

'Oh, Penni,' he sighed, as he crumbled a bit of his bread for her and threw it beneath the cart, where she was walking about trying to wring a worm from the hard paving-stones, 'if you can't lay an egg, do think of something else you can do so that Walter Romany will approve of you!'

'Here, you... this is my place. I found it yesterday!'

Peter the Red jerked around. A tall, thin man was scowling at them over a pushcart full of sausages. Peter the Red looked at Walter Romany to see what he intended to do.

But Walter Romany did not seem in the least disturbed. Deliberately he took his pipe from his mouth, gave Peter the Red a wink, and then observed in a mild voice:

'You have made a slight mistake, my friend; this is to-day, not yesterday. But,' with a shrewd glance at the other's crimson nose, 'I suppose that's not to be wondered at, for I see it was a generous inn that harbored you last night, and generous inns are likely to make their customers as uncertain about time as about the legs!' And Walter Romany wagged his head in pious regret. 'I'm afraid it has made you forget also that maxim of the Fair: "He who comes early may choose his place, but he who stays late will keep it."'

'That is right. That is true,' declared several bystanders, laughing and nodding their heads, for the instant there was promise of an interesting argument, every one within earshot left his work and crowded around.

The sausage man looked discomfited, finding every one against him, and the affair would have ended then and there had not another voice intervened.

'If you want the place,' it said, 'why don't you take it? They're nothing but a couple of miserable Gypsies.'

'Oh-ho?' said Walter Romany, and he put his pipe into his belt so as to be ready for business.

Peter the Red turned, scowling, to find the owner of the new voice. He lounged on the edge of the crowd, a strange fellow, all out of proportion, his

arms too long, his legs too short, his body too broad. His skin was the color of scorched paper, as if he had lived long in the sun and bitter wind. His thin lips curled in a mocking smile, and from under his narrow pale-lashed lids, his sharp, mischievous glance darted this way and that. It caught Peter's frowning scrutiny and lingered, staring, until Peter's scalp prickled and he looked away.

'Perhaps he is a dwarf!' he thought: 'a dwarf sneaked down from the Pale Mountains to see what evil he can make for mortal men.' And bending down he scooped Penni up from the stones at his feet. Who knew what chance spell might be floating round, and Penni take it for a new variety of beetle!

But if Walter Romany thought the malicious stranger one of the fairy folk, he did not let it worry him. Instead he eyed the sausage man, who at the other's encouragement had taken a bold step forward, and wagged his head. Let every one bear witness, he addressed the crowd, that it wasn't *his* fault if anything happened to this poor man! Let them agree that he had warned him away from Botto's heels, knowing that if the donkey took it into his head to dislike a person ——!! Here Walter Romany left the sentence eloquently unfinished. And Botto was more than ordinarily skittish to-day, for there was such a smell of *salame* on the air, and if

there was one thing that a donkey couldn't abide the smell of, it was *salame*... (Here every one looked to see if there was *salame* on the pushcart, and, as chance would have it, there was, several rolls of it!)

At that the whole crowd fell back, the sausage man among them, in such haste that he jumped into his own cart and knocked a great roll of *salame* on the ground right under the dozing Botto's nose.

Peter the Red could have laughed at the way his eyes popped, and he hustled his cart out of reach without even trying to retrieve the fallen sausage. At that minute a policeman came up and ordered every one to move on, and the crowd scattered to its own business.

'But Walter Romany —' Peter the Red stopped, and stared at the little man in amazement, for Walter Romany was quietly shaking with laughter until he had to lean against a wheel for support. 'What is the joke?' he asked severely, when the other's mirth still showed no sign of abating.

'The joke is, little Peter,' said Walter Romany, wiping his eyes on his sleeve, 'that Botto never kicked anything larger than a fly in his life, and as for *salame*, he cannot tell it from roses! Eh, Botto, is that not so?' And he leaned over and gave him a dig in the ribs, but Botto only shifted his weight to another foot and went on dozing.

'Nevertheless,' grumbled Walter Romany pre-

sently, as he moved about, seeing that his little store of goods was well on display for any early customers, 'I could have managed that sausage man myself, without invoking the aid of anybody's heels, if that other fellow had not thrown in his mischief-word. There are always, it seems, folk in this world, little Peter, who stir up mischief merely to see it bubble over. They are the ones to beware of most...'

'I think he was a dwarf, Walter Romany.' Peter the Red glanced about him fearfully. 'At least he looks exactly as I have always imagined a dwarf to look — only of course, a little larger.'

'Pff!' said Walter Romany. 'Why, a dwarf couldn't live two minutes in lowlands like this — even if there were such things. No, you needn't worry about dwarfs, little Peter; if there's any mischief done in the Fair, it will be mortal man that attends to it,' and he laid his finger along his nose. 'You mark my word, we haven't finished with the sausage man yet. He'll have his revenge some way, or I don't know human nature!'

Nevertheless, the day passed peacefully enough. The sausage man, who had found a place on the far side of the square, squeezed in between a cheesemonger and a vendor of plaster saints, seemed to have quite forgotten their existence. As for the dwarf man he, too, did not reappear, and presently Peter the Red forgot about him in the excitement of

serving the customers that clustered about the little cart.

So well did he learn the trade, indeed, that late in the afternoon, Walter Romany got out his box and slung the straps over his shoulders.

'You may keep shop for me awhile, little Peter,' he told him, 'while I go through the back streets with my wares.'

'But Walter Romany,' said Peter, though he swelled with pride at the thought of being left in charge, 'who will be on the back streets to-day?'

'There's always somebody on the back streets,' said Walter Romany. 'And, besides, I go to the inns; for when other people are most abroad, the innkeeper is busiest at home, and many a coin have I picked up from some grateful proprietor who couldn't leave his kitchen long enough to buy a new cord for his hat or a button for his suspenders.'

'The man is lucky then who keeps that inn,' said Peter the Red, nodding across the square at the hotel beside which Signorina Ida's would have appeared as nothing. 'For he is in the midst of the Fair without having to move at all!'

'You wouldn't believe it,' Walter Romany told him, 'but the keeper of that inn is one of my best customers. Why, last year when I stopped he wept upon my neck for joy! It seems he had just burst the middle button off his coat — he is very fat in the

middle — and he simply hadn't had a moment, so full the inn was, to run out and buy another one. And he had just had word that a Duke was coming that very night! So he bought every button I had, and told me to stop this year again, for by that time he'd be needing a new supply... Oh, I can tell you,' declared Walter Romany, giving his box a hitch higher on his back, 'it's no fun to be running an inn, especially when it's full of foreigners as that one is — they are always wanting the strangest things, one needs an imagination to keep up with them.'

'Foreigners? Where do foreigners come from, Walter Romany? I have never seen one.'

'East, west, north, and south,' returned the other vaguely. 'But the strangest of all come from beyond the sea — Americans they call themselves, I believe. But if I were to stand here answering all your questions, I'd never reach the back streets at all!' And he gave his pack another hitch and started off, soon to be lost to sight among the throng.

Peter the Red, left alone, felt all his self-confidence ooze suddenly out of him. Only pride kept him from ducking out of sight into the cart beside Penni.

'Have you any fine white thread for sale, boy?'

Peter the Red looked up. Beside him stood two girls, their arms about each other, their cheeks as round as apricots. Peter the Red answered in a voice that he hoped did not sound as shaky in their

ears as it did in his, 'Certainly, we have the finest of white thread for sale.' And he rummaged about for it, moving boxes this way and that with shaking fingers, until at last he found one with thread in it.

'How much?' giggled one of the girls as he held out one of the slender spools.

Peter could not remember. Still, he must say something — what manner of salesman would Walter Romany think him if he let a customer go just because he couldn't recall the price?

'Fifty centesimi,' he said at last, trying to speak carelessly.

The girls shrieked. 'Oh, we can buy it for less than that in a store!'

But Peter, now that he had heard the sound of his own voice, felt his confidence return. He shrugged.

'Oh, yes, of course, any one could buy it in a store. But what do you get for it — stuff that has lain on dusty shelves for who knows how long, while everything that we bring is imported! You can't buy thread that's come from a distance every day. Fifty centesimi is the price,' he repeated firmly, 'but if you will buy two spools I will make it ninety, and that is a bargain.'

His fingers shook as he accepted the money, but after that he was not afraid any more. When he saw another woman eyeing the wagon, he gave her an

inviting smile. So good was business, indeed, that before a half-hour was up, he had taken in a full fifteen lire and his pocket was fairly spilling wealth. It was necessary to find another place to keep it till Walter Romany returned. Peter, peering about the wagon, spotted Penni, sitting in her nest. Why not let Penni guard the money for him, and when Walter Romany came back, he would tell him to look in and see what Penni had laid! Chuckling, he pulled the fat wad from his pocket and thrust it under Penni's breast feathers. She gave a startled croak, then, recognizing the touch, made a crooning noise in her throat and settled down again.

'Well, boy, how's your business going?'

Peter whirled. The sausage man stood near by, his hands in his pockets and upon his face a grin that was meant to be amiable.

'Oh, fair enough.' From under his tangled curls Peter the Red shot him a dark glance of suspicion. Had the man seen him hide that money away?

But the sausage man returned his look with an even wider smile of friendliness, and said in a sympathetic tone, 'Only fair, eh?'

'I didn't mean it that way,' retorted Peter, unable to endure such unwarranted sympathizing. 'It couldn't be better!'

'That's good,' agreed the other heartily. 'I always knew this was a fine spot. I chose it myself first,

you know. However, I'll let you have it, for I've found a better one. But where is your father, Gypsy boy?'

'He's not my father,' contradicted Peter. 'And I'm not a gypsy. I'm ——' But, after all, what could he say he was, since he was not Walter Romany's or Papa Ott's or anybody's that he knew? So he only added sullenly, 'He has gone on the back streets to sell his wares.'

But the sausage man did not appear to have heard. He was staring past Peter's head with a look of consternation on his face.

'Look, boy! Your donkey! He will hurt somebody if you do not stop him!' And grabbing Peter's arm he shoved him forward.

'Botto, stop!' Peter the Red shouted as he leaped toward the shafts. 'Botto, what ——' He stopped as Botto, nibbling placidly at the bundle of hay Walter Romany had tied to the wagon shaft, turned his head a little, mildly, to see what the fuss was about.

'Huh!' said Peter the Red, and he grew furious, for he perceived that the sausage man had played a joke on him. 'Now, why did he do that?'

At that instant there was a commotion inside the wagon, a mighty squawking and fluttering — and all at once Peter the Red understood the meaning of that little joke! With fists doubled, he sprang

toward him, his eyes blazing. But he was too late. The sausage man's long legs were already taking him swiftly across the square, scattering the amazed onlookers to right and left.

CHAPTER IV

In which Penni, in her Own Way, Pays her Fare

But if Peter the Red had been too late, Penni the hen had not. The hand which had descended so rudely upon her back had been no familiar one this time. Scared and indignant, Penni had roused herself and flown, squawking and flapping, directly into the intruder's face, and on out into the sunlit square. It would be hard to say who went faster — the sausage man on his legs or Penni on her wings. She ran and she flew, cackling and sputtering, until she finally landed plop in the middle of one of the little green tables in front of the hotel where its guests were having tea. Away went the plates and the teacups crashing and splashing, and two people, who had been enjoying their refreshments in peace, sprang out of reach of the drenching so hastily they knocked their chairs over, and the hullabaloo became if possible worse than ever.

Meanwhile, Peter, with a hopeless glance for the vanishing heels of the thief, turned to thrust his fingers into the now empty nest. Oh, fool that he had been — fool, fool, to believe what that man said! How could he face Walter Romany when he came back? Surely Walter Romany would never forgive him, and he would have to go away and fend for himself, he and Penni —— Suddenly Peter the Red gasped. His fingers had touched something. Incredulous, he felt of it. There was no mistake — *the money was still there!* Penni had saved it. Joyfully, he looked about for her.

Penni! Where was Penni? His keen ears caught a distant cackle and he darted off toward the hotel. He pushed his way through the crowd, ducked under an elbow here and between a pair of legs there, until he found her, a ruffled bunch of feathers still standing in the midst of the ruin she had caused, and pounced upon her and swooped her up in his arms before she could escape again. Then, turning, with barely a glance for the throng about him, he would have rushed away had not a heavy hand fallen upon his shoulder.

'Not so fast, young rascal,' said a voice above him, and he felt himself being turned around to face an enormous stomach over which a black frock coat was fastened by the middle button.

'How do I know that is your hen, and if it is, why

should she be flopping about my tea-tables, frightening my guests? Will you tell me that?'

The questions came rumbling down the slope of the stomach like a cataract, and Peter, tearing his gaze loose from the straining middle button, tipped his head back and managed to see a great square face, decorated with a bristling black mustache, glowering down upon him.

'What is that in your hand?'

'Nothing,' said Peter, alarmed, and trying to thrust the money out of sight behind Penni.

'Let me see!' said his captor, and an instant later, much to Peter's surprise, he found his palm lying meekly open with the roll of bills upon it.

'Pff!' blowing out his great square cheeks. 'Who did you steal *that* from? Oh, yes, you must have! A boy as ragged as you couldn't come by so much money honestly. It would be impossible.'

'I didn't steal it!' shouted Peter, furiously determined to be heard above the rumbling and roaring. 'It belongs to Walter Romany, I tell you, and a sausage man tried to take it, but Penni flew out in his face and scared him off.'

'That is so! That is true!' declared several voices, and this time there was no mischief-loving dwarf among them to take the opposite side.

'I saw the whole thing!' cried a woman shrilly. 'The man ran away as if the Devil were after him. I

said to myself, "Something is afoot. No man with a good conscience runs from the Devil."'

'Yes, and perhaps he has come back,' interrupted Peter in despair — meaning the sausage man and not the Devil. 'And he will steal everything from Walter Romany's cart because I am not there to watch it! Oh, please let me go, and when Walter Romany stops to sell the hotel-keeper his buttons, you ask him if I didn't speak the truth.'

'*I* am the hotel-keeper,' said the man with the stomach, drawing such a breath of importance that the button creaked. 'As for Walter Romany, he has already been here, a half-hour and more ago.'

'Oh,' said Peter, his face falling, and he rubbed one bare foot against the other unhappily, while Penni from his arms reached out and pecked at the button, mistaking it no doubt for a black beetle.

Suddenly to his surprise the hotel-keeper leaned over as much as he could with his stomach and said, in a confidential tone: 'Listen, boy, I believe you, and for Walter Romany's sake I'd gladly let you go with no more ado. He told me when he was here all about you; "hair like a Saint's halo," he said, "and a way about him" — though I must say it is rather an impertinent one! But, you see, the thing is this: I'm in a bad predicament. That hen of yours broke up one of my guests' tea-parties, which is bad enough; and turned the cream pitcher into the young lady's

dress, which is worse. Unless something is done about it, they'll surely go away and give my hotel a bad name, saying that even the poultry come to tea. And, indeed, before they're done with it, it will probably be a cow that stepped on their tea-table.' Here the poor man mopped his glistening forehead. 'And then my business will be ruined, because no more Americans will come, and if no Americans come, whom can I charge twice the regular price for my rooms?'

He looked so desolated that Peter the Red began to feel sorry for him. 'But I do not know what *I* can do,' he said, 'except apologize. I hate to apologize, but I'll try if you think it would help.'

'I don't know, you can't tell. It depends on how angry they are. Still you had better try, for certainly he who spills the milk should mop it up.'

So Peter the Red turned with downcast eyes to the two Americans who all this time had stood near by; and tucking Penni under one arm, for she was somewhat in the way when it came to making pretty apologies, he got his hands together in the manner of a suppliant and began to speak very rapidly, saying that he was sorry; it was his hen and of course she hadn't done it on purpose, but if the cream which she had upset had done so much damage, he had three lire of his own to pay for it with...

And here, because it had cost him considerable

HE PRODUCED HIS PRECIOUS THREE LIRE

effort to offer his precious wealth, he looked up to see if they appreciated it. He found himself staring at the prettiest person he had ever seen; a girl not very much older than he was, with a skin faintly pink and white like a spring flower and hair that was the color of an old moon. Her eyes were the cool gray of a pool of rain water and her mouth was as imperious as a Princess's. Indeed, thought Peter, blinking his dazzled eyes, a Princess was what she must be! But the sight of an ugly stain where the cream had trickled down her blue dress recalled him abruptly to his duty.

Shifting Penni to his other arm, he produced his precious three lire and held them out. 'The other money which I have is not mine, or I should offer it,' he explained. 'Here, if you will only take them quickly, please.'

But the Princess only laughed, and turned instead her amused eyes from Peter's face to that of the gentleman who stood near by.

'Did you understand that, Father? He wants me to take his three lire and buy myself another dress, because this one is spoiled.'

'My dear daughter,' the gentleman retorted, 'I don't believe it. You could not have understood, for all your years of school in Italy!'

'Oh, but I did,' she insisted, and her voice, thought Peter, listening with puzzled ears to the conversa-

tion, was as gay as little church bells ringing for a *festa.*

'In that case,' said her father, 'please ask him his name and where he lives, for he is the first person I have met in all my travels who has wanted to give me money instead of accepting it!'

'You are always asking people's names, Daddy,' said his daughter, 'and what good does it do you? You never meet them again.'

'It's what comes of being a lawyer,' he told her, teasing; 'and, besides, you never can tell, he might be famous some day.'

The Princess raised her eyebrows at that, but she asked Peter, 'What is your name, boy?'

'Peter Rosso,' obediently, though he did not see what that had to do with the price of a ruined dress.

The Princess repeated this to the gentleman, who, if one judged by a certain resemblance between them, must be her father. The father of a Princess was usually a King. Peter the Red regarded this one with interest. If so, he was quite an everyday-looking King. There was a business-like air about him which Peter had never associated with Royalty.

'I'd scarcely call *that* a famous name, father. "Rosso" — why, there are as many Rossos over here as there are Smiths at home.'

'I seem to remember one John Smith, anyway,

that was famous — the one that Pocahontas is supposed to have broken her heart over ——'

Now what was all this talking about? Peter shifted Penni's weight impatiently. He could tell Walter Romany something about Americans if he ever got away. They made a great deal of talk over nothing — almost as much as Maria Madelina. Perhaps they were trying to decide if they should take his three lire for the ruined dress, or ask for more. He frowned in his anxiety.

At last the Princess turned to him again. 'Never mind about the money,' she told him graciously, 'for the spot will wash out easily, and even if it does not, it will not greatly matter.' She tilted her chin. 'I have many other dresses.'

'You mean... I may keep my money? You do not want it?' Peter the Red could hardly believe his ears. But when she had assured him a second time he blinked at her with joy and gratitude.

'I — you ——' And all at once he felt himself grow tongue-tied so that he could only smile at her wordlessly and then, turning, he plunged through the knot of spectators at top speed, Penni clutched tight beneath his arm. His breath came in short, happy spurts. He almost forgot to worry over the little cart he had left unattended so long. Surely the Saints — or was it his Lady of the Locket? — who had ordered the end of this adventure so hap-

pily would have seen to the cart in his enforced absence.

And so he was not at all surprised, when he came within sight of it, to perceive a figure standing near by, at the very end of a long stairway of light which the westering sun, now low over the gabled roofs, had let down from highest Heaven. Who would it be? he thought, approaching softly, for he felt he was in a holy place — sturdy Saint Christopher, or the gentle Anthony, or the good knight Florian who keeps one's worldly goods from fire? At first he had hoped, for one rash instant, that it was his Lady of the Locket herself, waiting to greet him with sweet, dark eyes that smiled at him from beneath her flaming halo, the very color of his curls. He soon saw, however, that it was a Gentleman Saint, and he drew near on tiptoe reverently.

Just then the Vision turned and blew a great puff of smoke from the long pipe in his mouth. It was no Saint at all, but Walter Romany, returned from the back streets before time!

Peter the Red stopped, and for the third time that afternoon his heart went heavy as the long end of a pendulum. Walter Romany had come back and found him gone! And what if he were far too angry even to listen to explanations? Very, very slowly, Peter the Red came up to him.

'So-ho,' said the little man, looking up and seeing

him. 'You've been for a walk, I see, you and your hen.' And because of the sunlight and the smoke, there was no way of telling if he had laughter in his eyes.

'It was not of our own choosing, either mine or Penni's,' Peter the Red said miserably, 'I ——' and he stopped. Of what use to make excuses if one does not care to listen to them? 'Here is your money, Walter Romany,' he said at last, fumbling, and he held it out to him. 'Fifteen lire is what I took in, and if you will count it, you'll find it all there.' With that he turned to go away, and it was not the sun that blinded him and made him stub his toe upon a broken stone, so that Walter Romany had to shoot out a hand and steady him.

'Where did you think to go, little Peter?' said Walter Romany, still holding him up.

'I was going to sleep in the chestnut grove again, and to-morrow I and Penni ——'

'Rubbish!' said the little man. 'When I have found a boy that suits me, I don't intend to let him go on any such short notice.' And he added more gently, seeing Peter's face: 'I heard the whole tale a long time ago, little Peter. A woman with a shrill voice passed and told it to me, but, knowing you had a shrewd head on your shoulders, I did not leave the cart and go to your assistance lest the thief return in my absence. Now come along and get your Penni

back into her nest, for it is time for all respectable hens to be in bed, and then run to the bakery and get us some poppy-seeded cakes — we should be hungry enough to-night to appreciate them! On the way back, you might stop and buy a handful of corn, too. Penni deserves something for her part in the business.'

'And perhaps,' said Peter as he deposited the sleepy Penni in her box — 'perhaps to-morrow she will lay an egg.'

'Let her take her time,' laughed Walter Romany. 'She has already paid her fare. Fifteen lire should take her a long way.'

That night Peter the Red, his head pillowed on a bolt of cloth, dreamed he was running after Penni, with a great pitcher of cream in his hand; and as he ran he called to her repeatedly to wait for him, in a strange language which he seemed to speak with perfect ease.

CHAPTER V

In which Peter the Red Learns More about Princesses

Six mornings later, the Valley Fair was over, and Botto went once more out of the Valley Town, ears flapping, feet pattering on the silent cobblestones. Again it was very early. High in the church tower the Three Sisters slept, their clacking tongues quite still. The square was silent and deserted. All the little fair booths had come down in the night and already most of the carts had trundled away. Even the Carrousel, which had stood in the very center, had folded itself up and vanished, no one knew where.

All about, the houses with their roofs drawn low across their eyes were sleeping. Only a few, a window lifted like a drowsy eyelid, saw the little cart go past. But on the high church wall, Saint Christopher, that gentle giant, smiled down on them be-

nignly, and Walter Romany, slowing Botto up, raised his cap.

'It is just as well,' he said to Peter the Red, nodding beside him, 'for the Saint to have a good look at us. It will be easier for him to keep an eye upon us as we journey.'

When they started on again, the hotel had awakened. A man in a green apron was throwing bucketfuls of water on the pavement and all the chairs were crowded on the green tables as if they had climbed up there to keep their feet from getting wet.

At sight of this activity, Peter the Red sat up and scowled. Soon, no doubt, the girl with the moon-gold hair, whom he had been foolish enough to pretend to himself was a fairy-tale Princess, would come dancing out of that great open door beside her father; would sit down at one of those small tables on which Penni had so unfortunately landed; or would saunter down the by-streets, laughing, always lightly laughing at every one and everything. And at the thought of that merry mocking tinkle, Peter the Red frowned more darkly than ever. Yes, Papa Ott' had been right, all women were alike, whether young or old. He knew it, alas, from bitter experience!

For yesterday, the last day of the Fair, Walter Romany had said to him: 'This afternoon, little Peter, is yours to do with as you please. I can manage the cart very well without you — I and Penni,'

and he twinkled. 'Only be back by sundown, for we start early on the road to-morrow, and there'll be more than Penni, who should be in bed by setting of the sun.'

So Peter the Red, a whole light afternoon upon his hands, went swaggering gayly among the crowds, his eyes open for any adventure chance might put within his way. He visited the little booths that lined the edges of the square, fingering this one's wares and gazing long at that, but managing to get by each in turn without so much as spending a soldo. For who knew when Penni might take to spilling cream again on some one's clothes who might not prove so generous? — and, besides, it was always wise to keep something on hand for emergencies.

His thriftiness, however, did not prevent him in the least from bargaining fiercely over the price of a little pig, or offering a hook-nosed man a price so small for a pair of green velvet breeches that the fellow flew into a rage and called curses after him as Peter, grinning, snapped his fingers and swaggered away.

So at last in high good humor with himself he joined the crowd which gaped at the Carrousel in the middle of the square, and there perceived, not many folk removed from him, the Princess and her father, who had also paused to watch the old white mule that made it go plod round and round, and the

little wooden horses go whirling past. Peter the Red's heart skipped a beat, then hurried to catch up as he edged a little nearer, watching them from the corner of his eye. But before he had reached them, he saw her father lean down to speak to her. She

nodded; and they both turned and walked rapidly away, leaving Peter staring after them in disappointment. But not for long — in a few moments he recovered sufficiently to take the same direction, though what he intended to do when he caught up with them, he scarcely knew. Only something, some interest deeper than mere curiosity, seemed to draw him irresistibly after them. So he hurried across the square, and saw his quarry disappear into the shadows of a narrow side street. Following them through its deserted arcades, he presently spied them in the doorway of a dusty little shop, chatting with its keeper, an old fellow who peered at them

over slanting spectacles, and from time to time wagged his graying head emphatically.

Peter the Red tiptoed nearer. No one seemed to notice his approach, although the shopkeeper kept breaking off his talk to peer nearsightedly up and down the street, as if expecting to see some one there. Peter, keeping close to the shadow of the house walls, crept a little nearer yet. The American gentleman was holding something in the palm of his hand, and now he turned a little that the light might fall the better on it and Peter caught the flash of a stone, a purple stone set in a square frame of silver. Suddenly he understood. The dusty shop window against which he leaned was full of such trinkets — necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, bags and buckles. The gentleman was bargaining for one of these — doubtless he would give it to the Princess, for Princesses, as Peter knew, always wore lots of jewelry.

So interested was he in the transaction that he did not notice the approach of another person on the other side of the street, until a pair of fingers caught him hard by the ear and swung him round and he found himself peering up into the dark face of the dwarf man.

'*Monello! Ragazzaccio!* Thief!' cried a voice above his head, and with another tweak of his ear he went spinning down the street, so suddenly that he would have fallen head over heels and scraped his

nose against the cobblestones had he not flung out his hands to save himself and turned a neat handspring before he could regain his balance. Then, right side up, he ran away, with never a backward glance. Yet it was not so much fright that urged him on, faster and faster, nor the stinging of his ear, but the hurt that smarted in his breast. For behind as he went, light as a fairy carillon, the Princess's mocking laughter followed him.

'What is the matter, little Peter?' inquired Walter Romany mildly. They had left the Valley Town behind them by now and were riding out along the dew-wet countryside. 'For a full quarter of an hour you have sat there scowling and doubling up your fists as if to fight with every lamp-post.'

Peter the Red started so that a lock of hair fell down across his eyes and he had to unfold a fist to push it back.

'I was thinking,' he admitted, 'of something not pleasant.'

'Do that at sun-up,' warned Walter Romany, 'and you will have a bad taste in your mouth all day. You had better think of something else quickly, for the sun will very soon show a shining edge above yonder horizon.'

'I can think of nothing else,' began Peter; but just then a skylark rose from a meadow near by and went

heavenward on long spirals of song. So Peter the Red, knowing there is nothing in all the world so pleasant as a bird's song, smoothed the scowl from his face and pinned his mind on that, until at last the sun came up, a golden circle above the trees, and Walter Romany spoke again:

'A song for our ears and the morning sun for our eyes; how about a bit of bread also for our stomachs?'

And Botto, who was of the same opinion, stopped and began to crop the sweet wet grass, while within the depths of the wagon Penni could be heard fussing about and clucking to herself. Walter Romany leaned under the seat and produced a loaf of bread as long again as little Peter's arm and broke off for him a brown and crusty end. Peter munched it with satisfaction. It was good to linger by the roadside eating breakfast. And yet . . . and yet . . . he could not wholly restrain an impatient sigh as he lifted his eyes to the morning hills. Oh, Time, be not too slow, nor, Road, too long, until we pass the Gateway to the Pale Mountains!

As if he had read something of his thoughts, Walter Romany presently observed, 'A day and a night and another day and we should be at the Gateway, little Peter.'

A day and a night and another day! Eternity thrice multiplied! Gloomily he ticked the tedious

hours off upon his thumbs till Walter Romany smiled and said: 'It is only because you are young they seem so long, little Peter. When you are as old as I, an hour will be like a swallow's flight — which to stay with your hands is impossible. Besides, there'll be enough to do and see and hear within these next two days as will make some of those tedious hours at least slip by unnoticed; for if it is true that a watched pot will not boil, it is equally true that a roast forgotten in the oven will burn the sooner.' And he took another bite of bread and wiped the crumbs from his mustache. 'That's another thing my wife, the Gypsy Woman, taught me!'

'Is your wife, the Gypsy Woman, in Holy Field, like Papa Ott'?' asked Peter, for this was not the first time that Walter Romany had mentioned her.

'Not she! Or at least as far as I know. And, besides, gypsy women are not buried in Holy Fields, little Peter, even when they die.'

'Neither was Papa Ott's cow, though I suggested it because he had loved her very much. The priest did not seem to like it, either.' It was strange who could and could not lie in Holy Field.

'I sometimes think,' said Walter Romany, 'it's just as well my wife, the Gypsy Woman, is not here, for if she were to see me wandering like this over the countryside, the shock might kill her!' and he chuckled.

'Did you run away from her?' inquired Peter the Red sympathetically.

'No; it was she that ran away from me. She could not help it, I can see that now, for the Love of the Road was in her blood and it made her ever longing to go somewhere, while I was quite content to spend my life within that valley where I was born, and thought, moreover, my house should be enough for her, too, the whole year round. And so, for my stubbornness, one fine spring day I woke to find her gone!' He shook his head and sighed. 'I should have known a gypsy could no more resist the spring than a bird can — but each must fly somewhere.'

'And what happened then, Walter Romany?' Peter settled down on a warm bank, and put his hands behind his head. 'Tell me, what happened then?'

'Well, then . . . do you know it was very strange, but when I found myself alone, instead of settling down in peace as one might think, I could not bear the house at all! I, too, began to dream of being on the Road, following where it led by day and lying in the open fields at night, until at last I could stand it no longer. So I sold the house where I was born and bought instead this little wagon. And now we travel up and down the hills together, Botto and I, to every lonely mountain valley where folk will buy my wares. When it is cold and rainy, I stay at inns —

for I am not so young as I once was, little Peter — but when the summer comes and draws fair weather after it and wraps the very mountain peaks in warmth, then I make my fire beside the Road as gypsies do and let the stars be candles when I go to bed.'

'I love it, too, Walter Romany,' cried Peter, sitting up, his face aflame, 'though I never knew how much before!' and he added, 'If I hadn't made up my mind long ago to be a Prince, I think I'd want to be a Gypsy.'

'A mind is easily changed, if one really wishes it,' said Walter Romany; 'the trouble with most folk is they never can be sure whether or not they really wish! But come along, boy, for if we sit here all day it's very sure we'll get no farther! Where is that hen of yours — still on her nest?'

At that instant there was a loud '*Cocodè! Cocodè! Cocodè!*' and on the edge of the wagon appeared Penni's plump form. She wiped her bill in a satisfied way, fluffed herself out and announced to the whole world:

'I've laid an egg! I've laid an egg at last!'

'Penni!' But Peter the Red didn't really believe her until he had gone himself and peered into the nest; and there, just as Penni had said, was a round brown egg, still rough to the touch and warm! 'If only you'd laid it a little sooner, Penni, we could

have had it for breakfast,' admonished Peter, but Penni didn't care.

'It will keep,' said Walter Romany, very nearly as excited as Peter himself, 'and it will make us a fine supper to-night, boy. The first village we stop in, we'll buy some poppy-seeded rolls to go with it.'

All that day they journeyed up and down the little hills, stopping at this village and at that, for, as Walter Romany shrewdly pointed out, there were always things that folk forgot to buy at the Fair and would be glad of a chance to purchase afterward — 'And I didn't need my wife, the Gypsy Woman, to teach me *that*, little Peter!' At night they made their camp in the shelter of a ruined castle. For food they had the egg well baked in ashes and, as Walter Romany had promised, poppy-seeded rolls, and for dessert a caraway cake and wild strawberries from the hillside about them.

When they woke next morning, it was to find themselves wrapped in fog, which did not burn off after the manner of the morning mists, but only seemed to settle lower with the coming on of day. There was no gay sunrise flaunting in the east, and everything was sticky to the touch. At noon, Peter the Red felt the first cold drops upon his face, and a few minutes later the hills and even the road itself were hidden behind the slanting curtains of the rain. Presently, as they rounded a corner, a gust of wind

swooped down upon them and tumbled Peter shivering into the warmer depths of the wagon. Walter Romany lifted his nose as it went past and sniffed.

'That wind cooled its toes upon a glacier,' he called over his shoulder cheerfully. 'We cannot be far from the Gateway now.'

Nevertheless, the gray afternoon was waning when they finally came out upon the brow of a hill up which Botto had been plodding for a weary hour or more, and Walter Romany pointed downward with his stick.

'Yonder,' he said, 'is where we spend the night, and yonder, little Peter, is the Gateway to the Pale Mountains.'

Peter the Red peered out to see. There before him rose a high wall of hills. No kindly valleys thrust their gentle fingers deep into their fastnesses; no road went looping up their stern slopes. Save in one place they seemed impassable, and that lay straight ahead, a narrow cleft as if some giant knife had cut the hill in two. So that was the Gateway! The Gateway to the Pale Mountains! Peter's heart beat faster in his numbed breast and the raindrops dried upon his glowing eyes. He could hardly drag his gaze from it to the village that lay below them, as snug in its soft green bowl as Penni in her nest. But when he did, it was to laugh aloud, because it looked for all the world — with the tall white tower of its

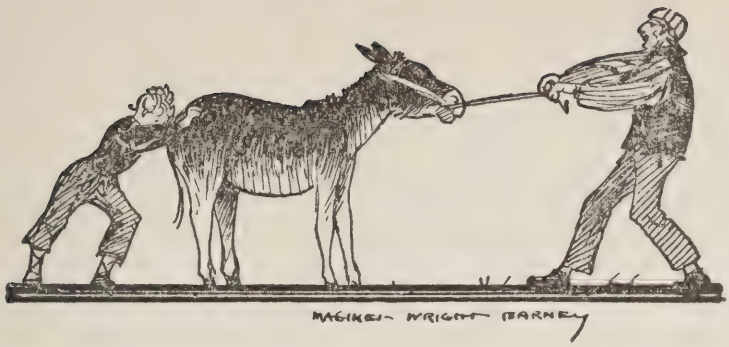
little church rising at the nearer end of it — like a big white goose with all her gray goslings gathered close about her.

'They say that in this village,' said Walter Romany, as they rattled downhill toward it, 'every other house is an inn. Which is just as well, for something tells me there'll be a crowd of travelers storm-bound in it to-night.'

Walter Romany had spoken truth; so great was the crowd in fact that, though they went to every inn in turn, they met the same response:

'No room. The place is overflowing now.'

'There's but one inn left,' said Walter Romany at last, 'and for one night surely it will not make us bankrupt. We will try the Inn of the Elephant.'



CHAPTER VI

At the Inn of the Elephant

The Inn of the Elephant stood on a street so narrow it was a great pity, for it was the gayest house in the village, and that was saying a good deal. Its walls were a buttercup yellow, and there were wreaths of purple roses painted about each window, and the wooden balcony that ran clear around the second story was green. Yet for all it did not show off to advantage, there was an air of superiority about it that struck the approaching traveler the minute he came within eyeshot.

'You should have seen me at my best,' it seemed to say. 'Then Knights in arms came clanking up, and Kings and Cardinals and ladies stopped their silken litters here to rest. What tales I might recount if I could talk! And not the least of them would be of that mysterious-looking beast which left its name with me. Sent by a Sultan it was, to a Great King in the North, and though it stopped here only

long enough to fill its trunk with water and squirt it down its dusty sides, and take a little straw and tuck it in its mouth, I remember it as well as if it happened yesterday. And if you, too, would like to know how it looked, go and read my sign.'

'Ho! ho!' laughed Peter the Red, peering up at the golden board that swayed creakily above the door. 'Whoever drew that cow forgot and gave her a tail at each end!'

'That's no cow, boy, but an elephant, and the second tail is what he eats with — or so they say. *I* don't know — it was long before my time.' Walter Romany clambered down from the cart and pounded on the heavy wooden door beneath the swaying Elephant.

After a while a little man blew out on the balcony and peered down. 'What do you wish, down there?'

'Beds,' said Walter Romany, cupping his hands about his voice lest the wind blow it away. 'Also a little food would not come amiss.'

'Beds are all taken,' said the little man, preparing to blow in again.

'We can pay for what we get,' suggested Walter Romany.

'Don't worry about that,' retorted the other, 'but I tell you there's no room.'

'Who's that you're talking to, Maxi?' said a deep

voice behind him, and out came an enormous woman and looked over the rail.

'Only a couple of peddlers, darling,' said her husband. 'Now, please don't be sorry for them because there's no room. I've just told them so.'

'Who runs this inn, you or I?' And she leaned on the railing again until it groaned with her weight. 'There is a child down there. A little boy, too! Maxi, look, he is just the image of our Paul when he was a baby. Oh, you pretty thing!' And she blew a kiss at Peter the Red, but the wind carried it away.

'Yes, yes, my love, but I tell you there isn't a bed ——'

'He can sleep on the stove, then. What would be nicer than a good warm stove under you on a night like this? And his father can make himself a bed on the table, provided he gets up before breakfast time. ... Drive around to the back, pretty boy,' she called over the balcony. 'If your donkey is small enough, you may find room in the stable for him.'

Walter Romany led Botto around to the back, where was a great courtyard on which from three sides the windows of the Inn of the Elephant looked down. And on the fourth side was the stable.

'It's well filled,' said Walter Romany, investigating. 'But I see a little corner into which Botto ought to fit.'

But Botto, upon being unhitched, put his four feet together and refused to try it.

'What now? What now?' grumbled Walter Romany. 'There's no precipice ahead, you lop-eared son of a rabbit,' for the weather had told for once upon the little man's usual good temper.

'I'll go and look.' Peter the Red slid down over the wheel and squeezed past Botto into the dim stable.

'It's only an automobile,' he called forth presently. 'But it has big round eyes that stare at you ——'

'An automobile?' grumbled Walter Romany — 'as if enough of them did not push us off the road to-day without having to stable with one at night!' He poked his head in. 'Backed up to the manger, too! Since when do cars eat straw? Still, there's room enough to get Botto in beside it if we can only persuade him so. You might try, little Peter. You have at times more influence with him than I.'

So Peter the Red persuaded Botto, and the little donkey reluctantly permitted himself to be drawn in, while Walter Romany pulled the little cart after him out of the wet.

'Come along now, little Peter,' he said, more agreeably when all that could be was done.

But Peter suddenly hung back. 'I will stay out here, Walter Romany, and keep Botto and Penni company. They might be nervous in such a tight place and . . . truly, Walter Romany, I prefer it.'

Walter Romany stared at him a moment, and

then he burst out laughing. 'So that's the shoe that's pinching your foot, is it?'

Peter the Red flushed. 'You know very well I have no use for women. And this one will want to kiss me. I know it.' He made a face.

'It only takes a minute,' Walter Romany consoled him — 'like having a tooth pulled. And any one can stand a kiss for a warm place to sleep. Come along. She doesn't mean any harm by it, you know,' he added, as Peter the Red still hung back. 'It's her way, and she's very kind at heart in spite of it.'

So Peter the Red, being overruled, followed him across the courtyard and up the outside stairs and into the big eating-room of the inn. For a moment, the steaming warmth and brilliancy within dazzled him so that he could not see at all, but gradually things took shape, and he perceived a long wooden table polished thin by the elbows of many generations of customers; and a wooden bench that ran the full length of the room, and at the far end a great porcelain stove about which was grouped a dozen or more travelers, puffing at their long pipes. On the frescoed walls a number of chamois's heads stared down at him, and from the center of the paneled ceiling gazed a great painted Eye.

'That is the Eye of God, pretty boy,' boomed a voice behind him. '*You* don't need to worry about

it, but' — her glance lingered upon the group by the fire — 'there's *some* who remember to pay for what they eat and drink better with that Eye upon them.' She patted Peter's head. 'There, one kiss and you may run to the stove and get warm, pretty child. How very like you are to my Pauli! See,' she called to a giant young man who at that moment appeared in the doorway with a tray of frothing mugs. 'He is exactly like you when you were a baby.'

Just then a red-cheeked maid appeared behind him and called:

'Mamma Kat', the foreign guests wish to speak with you.'

'Ach!' grumbled Mamma Kat', lumbering away, 'those foreign guests! — Still, they bring us good money.'

Thus released, Peter followed Walter Romany across the room where the group smoked about the porcelain stove.

'Greet God, friends.' They all looked up and nodded.

'Greet God,' responded Walter Romany, but Peter said nothing, for he had caught sight of a face among them which made the angry blood rush up to his forehead. It was the dwarf man who had tweaked his ear in the Valley Town; who had called him sneak-thief and *ragazzaccio*, and kicked him off and set a girl's mocking laughter about his ears! Now he

sat in the far corner, his pipe in his mouth, and watched the rest from beneath his drooping lids.

'There is no need to ask,' said Walter Romany, taking his seat on the bench with the rest, 'if you have come from the Valley Fair.' They laughed and agreed. 'I remember seeing you there, too,' observed some one.

'And whither are you bound now, peddler?' queried a smooth voice.

Peter's heart grew cold, for it was the dwarf man that asked the question.

'The Pale Mountains,' Walter Romany gave him such a bland glance that Peter knew he also had recognized him. 'And you?'

'Val Rosa. That is three days' journey on foot — only I do not go by foot. Since during the Bad Days I learned to drive a motor car, I have been engaged to drive a couple of rich Americans there.'

Rich Americans? Peter started. Could it be *they* were here, too?

'How are you called, stranger?' asked Walter Romany still observing the dwarf man mildly.

'Laurin is my name ——'

Laurin? Laurin had been a king of the dwarfs long long ago. That was appropriate enough! Each man in turn now gave his name and location:

'Peder Pletsch of Fals.'

'Carlo Monaigo of Pieve.'

'Martin Croda of Croda'; and so on.

When it came to Walter Romany, he answered with a twinkle in his eye: 'I? I am Walter Romany of Fals and Pieve and Croda and Cadore, but most of all, of the Open Road. And this is my fellow traveler, Peter Rosso.'

'Bravo! Walter Romany! Bravo, Peter Rosso! To the gentlemen of the Open Road!' And the toast roared up to the smoky panels of the ceiling from which the Eye of God looked down. But Laurin only smiled, and, as he tipped his mug to drink with the rest, Peter caught above its rim the steady scrutiny of his narrowed eyes and fancied there a puzzled look as if the man were trying to place him.

'And, indeed,' thought Peter to himself, 'if he has so soon forgotten who it was he sent whirling down the street, far be it from me to remind him!'

Soon, in came Pauli with a plate of good brown bread and a monstrous bowl of dumpling soup which he placed upon the table. At the luscious garlicky steam that rose from it, Peter's nose quivered like a rabbit's and he sprang up with alacrity, as for that matter did all the other guests.

Then for a little while there was no sound in the room but the drinking of soup and the breaking of bread, and when at last it was over and every one leaned back and felt anew for his pipe, Peter the Red

slipped out unnoticed, a piece of bread in his blouse for Penni.

As he reached the door of the stable, a faint noise within caused him to stop, cautious and listening. Was it a rat? And he thought of Penni. There it was again, like a soft quick step in the darkness. Noiselessly Peter stole in and flattened himself against the wheel of the little wagon. For a moment he heard nothing, and then quite near at hand he heard it once more. It came from the other side of the motor-car. It must be a thief... what should he do? Run back to the house for help or cry out? Somewhere in the darkness near at hand, Botto snorted uneasily. Then Peter heard a door close and the footsteps move away. And they were going not toward the court, but toward the hapless donkey! Thoroughly alarmed, he wriggled as noiselessly as possible past the cart, past Botto's shaggy flank. The intruder was by this time so close that Peter could hear a quick, indrawn breath, and knew the other, too, was listening. He could stand it no longer.

'What are you doing?' he cried out, springing up and shooting out a hand. It encountered a slender wrist and there was a girl's faint scream in the darkness beside him.

'Oh,' he said, dropping the wrist, and knew at once without being told who it was. 'I thought it was... it was a thief.' And he added suspiciously after a

moment's pause, 'What do *you* wish out here with our donkey?'

'I was only giving him a lump of sugar.' Her voice was still shaking. 'Oh, you frightened me so! I didn't know anybody else was here. Are you — who are you, anyway?'

'I ——' All at once his former indignation rose up in his throat and choked him. 'I am the boy you laughed at the other day in the Valley Town,' he told her bitterly, 'and I cannot bear to be laughed at!' He swallowed hard. 'You had been so generous before, too, when Penni spilled the cream. That made it all the worse, because I could not understand ——'

'So it *was* you who arrived this evening!' she cried, 'I told Father so, but he would not believe me.' She giggled. 'You looked so funny and scared

that day, with your hen held tight under one arm.'

'It wasn't then I meant that you laughed,' he answered sulkily. 'It was afterwards when I followed you to that shop. I — I don't know why I followed you... but it was for no evil purpose, I swear that... and then suddenly that fellow who is with you, Laurin, sneaked up behind me and caught me by the ear and gave me such a shove I would have fallen if... and *you* laughed ——'

'Caught you by the ear?' Her voice was puzzled. 'But when? I don't understand.'

'I had to turn a handspring to keep from falling and skinning my nose. I had the mark of his nail on my ear for a long time too,' he rubbed at it and added once more, 'And you laughed and laughed!'

'Did I?' In the silence that followed Peter heard the crunch of Botto's teeth on the sugar. 'I did not know you turned a handspring because he had pushed you,' she said at last. 'I turned around only in time to see your legs where your head should have been, and you looked so funny, how could I help laughing?' Her voice, for all she could do, started to peal again, but with an effort she sobered it. 'Besides, it was such a perfect handspring. I have always wanted to do handsprings.' There was envy in her tone.

'That was nothing. I can do a much better one

when I try,' muttered Peter, kicking at the manger, but he was mollified in spite of himself.

'As for Laurin,' she went on, 'I never have liked him, and now I shall like him less.' He was sure she made a face. 'Horrid thing! Still, Father says he must do business with him a little while longer, so I do not see...'

'I knew you would feel that way!' cried Peter triumphantly, who until that moment hadn't known it at all. 'Do you know who you remind me of? Signorina Ida, and she is very nearly as good as a man.'

'"Very nearly"! "much better than" is what you should say — though, of course, I don't know Signorina Ida...'

'Did you see me by the Carrousel that day?' demanded Peter, feeling it wiser perhaps to change the subject.

'Was it you who stood there with your mouth open as if' — she giggled — 'as we say in my country — you were catching flies?'

'Nothing of the sort,' cried Peter, much offended. 'I never opened my mouth at all! Not even when you laughed at me!' he finished.

'What is your name?' she asked him curiously.

'I told you that, in the Valley Town.'

'But I have forgotten. Tell me again — for a favor.'

'Peter, then,' sullenly.

'Is that all?'

'They call me "The Red" sometimes, but that is because of ——'

'Yes, I know! It is because of your temper. Peter the Red-tempered! That is a fine name! Well, I'm going to tell you something, Peter the Red-tempered. If you want to make any friends in this world, you'd better soften the color a little bit.' She had slipped past him in the dark and was out in the courtyard before he could think of a reply.

'Wait!' he called, jumping after her. 'Wait only a little minute — please!'

She hesitated. 'What do you wish?'

He was beside her now. 'I wish to thank you before you leave, Signorina,' he said humbly, 'for bringing Botto a lump of sugar.'

'It was not only for that reason I came out, Peter.' She shrugged, and added more kindly, 'I had left my scarf in the car and I wanted it... as for the sugar I just happened to have that...'

Peter the Red began to grin. 'I "happened" to have a piece of bread with me, too — that's why I came to call on Penni...'

'Is Penni the hen?'

'Yes. Would you like to see her eat from my hand? You might,' he added, remembering his manners, 'feed her, if you liked.'

'No, I must go.' She glanced up at the lighted windows of the inn. 'I'd like to, though ——'

'To-morrow morning, then.'

'No, to-morrow morning we will be gone... Laurin says we must start very early.'

'Oh.' His face fell a little. 'Do you know,' he confided, 'I never thought I would want to bother with you again. I seldom do bother with women...'

'Oh, Peter, if you only knew how funny you were! Besides, *I* am not a woman...' She tossed her fair head as if she thought she were not so far off from it, at that; and Peter saw that for some reason his remark had pleased her. 'You're different, too,' she told him, 'from any peddler's boy I ever saw. In fact, I wonder if you aren't somebody else in disguise...'

She stopped, for a window of the inn had opened and some one looked out.

'It is my father,' she said hurriedly. 'Good-bye, Peter the Red. Maybe we will meet again some time.'

'Good-night ——' He paused, remembering that he did not even know her name.

'Margaret,' she called back to him airily as she ran across the courtyard.

'Margaret.' He repeated it to himself as he fed the sleepy Penni her supper, and because she had told him nothing else he added a surname of his own, re-

membering the pale moon-gold of her hair. 'Margaret the Fair.'

When Peter the Red entered the big eating-room once more, he found it reverberating with merriment. One of the travelers had produced an accordion and in one corner, Maxi, Mamma Kat's husband, was picking at an old zither. The table and chairs had been pushed back, and in the center of the room Pauli the giant and Rosalie the pretty chambermaid were dancing lustily. The others kept time with a snapping of fingers and a stamping of feet. Even Mamma Kat' was there, having got her foreigners safely disposed of for the night.

'Now it is my turn to dance,' cried Mamma Kat', when Rosalie had dropped at last, breathless, upon a bench. She looked about. 'Where is my pretty little boy? He shall dance with me!'

Peter the Red looked this way and that, but there was no escape. Already laughing hands were pushing him forward.

'Here is your partner, Mamma Kat'. See how anxious he is! Make your bow, little Peter!'

'I have never danced before,' cried Peter, trying to duck out of sight.

'I will teach you then,' said Mamma Kat'. 'You do it like this, one — two' (the floor shook); 'and you turn like this, three — four' (the windows rattled); 'and then you give a little slide' (down fell a

chamois's head from the wall). Rosalie shrieked and the dance stopped in confusion.

'Be careful, Mamma Kat',' advised Laurin, retrieving the chamois's head, 'or you will dance the house down, and then what will your guests do?'

'That is true,' admitted Mamma Kat' ruefully, holding her massive sides and puffing. 'There is an hour for dancing, as for everything else, and I fear mine struck long ago! I am sorry, little Peter, to disappoint you, but I had better not try again.'

'That is nothing,' said Peter with a magnanimous gesture. 'I do not mind in the least being disappointed.'

'Hear the pretty boy!' cried Mamma Kat', and she would have kissed him, but Peter side-stepped gracefully, and offered from a safe distance, 'I will show you what *I* can do without teaching if you like ——'

At that everybody shouted, 'What can you do, Peter Rosso?'

'Handsprings,' he told them. 'And I wager that is more than any of *you* can!'

'You are right there!' agreed Mamma Kat'. 'There is a time for handsprings, too, and every one here must have passed it but you. Yes, Peter, make us a handspring please.'

Peter the Red looked about to make sure that every one was watching him, and as his glance fell on

Laurin, he saw with satisfaction that the dwarf man was again staring at him uneasily.

'Hurry along, boy, let us see you handspring!' cried several voices impatiently, and Peter, tossing his hair from his eyes, sprang willingly to the center of the floor, threw up his heels and went whirling down the room so fast he seemed, quite verily, a wheel. Then he turned and came back again in the same fashion, uncurling himself, blinking and breathless, at Rosalie's feet.

'Bravo! Bis! Bis!' A round of applause greeted his humming ears, and he grinned back, pleased at his sudden popularity.

'Oh, see!' squealed Rosalie, leaning over him. 'He wears some one's picture on his heart! Let me look! Is it your sweetheart? You are too young for such things, naughty boy! Please let me see...'

'No.' Peter hastily snatched his locket from her inquisitive fingers and tucked it safe inside his blouse. 'No one can see Her. She belongs only to me.' And he laid his hands over it, looking about him defiantly.... For the third time that evening, Laurin was staring at him, that odd expression in his eyes; but this time his gaze was not at Peter's face, but on the spot where his precious locket lay.

Very soon thereafter the company broke up, for they would all be starting early the next morning. Rosalie brought thick blankets for Walter Romany

and two billowy feather beds to spread upon the great stove for Peter to sleep between.

Walter Romany rolled himself up upon the table and was soon snoring, but Peter could not sleep; his mind went whirling on and on as if it were still turning handsprings. A mouse gnawed in the wall somewhere, and he thought of Penni alone in a — doubtless — rat-infested stable. What if one were even now creeping, creeping toward her...?

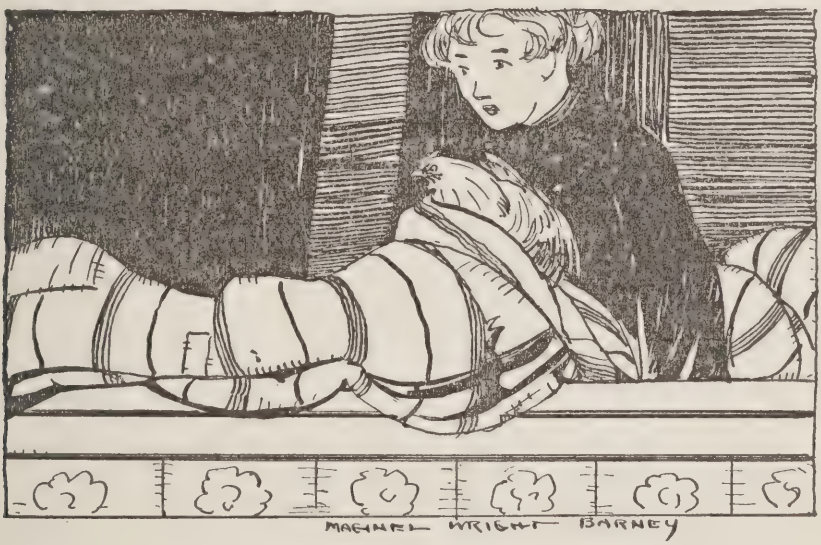
Peter sat up and threw back the feather bed that covered him. Silently he slid down from the stove....

Penni gave a surprised croak when Peter's hands closed upon her wings, but by this time she was used to being picked up at unusual hours and protested no more. He carried her back and cuddled down once more between his feather coverings, while Penni, after a little fidgeting, settled contentedly within the circle of his arms, and in a few minutes they were both asleep.

Peter did not know how long he had been so, when he woke, an eerie feeling in the pit of his stomach. In the nest of his arms he saw that Penni had her head up, too. He caught the uneasy gleam of one round eye.

'Did you have a nightmare, Penni?' he whispered, and then the strangest conviction came over him.... *Some one was in the room! Some one that shouldn't be there!* He lay very still, listening, but there was no

sound except the wind against the window panes. And yet... he was sure that Some one was standing near by... watching him...'



Very cautiously he managed to move his head a trifle, and at once something bright flashed across his eyes. For a minute his heart stopped entirely, and then he almost laughed aloud. It was the moon that had frightened him! The old moon, partly worn away, but shining brightly for all that, through the breaking clouds. Relieved, he curled up to go to sleep again. 'Don't worry, Penni. It's nothing but the old moon!' And his hand reaching out to stroke her feathers encountered something else. It felt like the loose end of a string. With a gasp he clutched at his breast, and in the bedclothes and even under Penni's ruffled breast.

His locket, his precious locket, was not there!

CHAPTER VII

The Gateway!

Peter the Red next morning could not eat his breakfast, though he did his best to please Walter Romany, who was quite disturbed by this sudden loss of appetite.

'Tears I can stand,' said Walter Romany, 'for they can be wiped away; or even a fit of temper, since often a fair word may banish that; but when a boy's appetite forsakes him, there is nothing one can do to remedy it — unless, indeed, one takes him by the nose and stuffs choice morsels into him as if he were a goose being fattened for a *festa*! How would you like to be a goose, boy... eh?'

Peter the Red only shook his head, though he made a gallant effort to swallow the creamy cup of chocolate Mamma Kat' had made especially for him. But it was no use. It only caught in his throat and choked him until Walter the Romany had to pound him on the back.

'It is very evident,' said the little man, wagging a mournful head, 'that bad luck is going to attend us unless that precious locket of yours is found... Did you look behind the stove?'

'I have looked everywhere, Walter Romany — behind and under and on each side. I even opened the door and looked in. I tell you it was stolen!'

'But why should a thief take your locket, little Peter, which after all is a thing of little value... to any one save you... and leave my purse untouched?'

'How can I say?' cried Peter impatiently. 'Perhaps Penni frightened him off. I only know the locket was on my neck when I came back from the stable. I remember pulling at it as I lay down again because it had slipped down my back instead of my front — and when I awoke, it was gone! And if I hadn't overslept this morning, so that he got away unseen, I'd have pointed out the thief to everybody, too — even those Americans he travels with!' And he choked again for rage and disappointment.

Walter Romany, however, only told him not to be foolish. What should Laurin want with a boy's trinket? And suspecting was a dangerous game; before you knew it, you were looking sidelong at every one, even your best friends. Peter accepted this admonition in silence, but it did not keep him from having his own opinion, nevertheless.

But though lockets were lost (or stolen) and breakfasts stood uneaten, life could not stop but so long on account of that. And very soon Botto was harnessed once more to the little cart and the inn folk gathered in the courtyard to bid them farewell.

Peter the Red scarcely heard their good wishes; so sunk was he in misery he even let Mamma Kat' kiss him on each cheek, and did not even flinch.

'Have you ever crossed a pass, Peter Rosso?' asked Maxi, blowing up. 'No? Very well, I warn you, when you reach it, cover yourself well or the frost fairies will pinch you black and blue.'

'For shame to tease the pretty boy!' Mamma Kat' gave her husband a reproachful cuff. 'Can't you see he feels badly enough? And for that matter so do I. It is not good luck for a guest to lose something in my house. I do not like it!'

'Perhaps it will still turn up,' said Walter the Romany, climbing into his usual seat. 'In that case when we come through in the autumn we can pick it up.'

'And have bad luck all summer for nothing?' Peter started to protest, but changed his mind. Of what use to worry over that? No one would find the locket, anyway, for the very good reason it was even now reposing in Laurin's pocket.

'God keep you, and good luck,' called every one as Walter Romany prodded Botto's rump.

Mamma Kat' threw Peter a final kiss. 'Do not forget. You are to come again, pretty boy.'

'Good-bye! Good-bye!' Out of the courtyard they rattled down the street while the village folk squeezed themselves into the doorways to let them pass, and chickens and geese and goats and even a little pig went dodging ahead in search of a good place to turn aside. Walter Romany fumbled for his pipe and cast a speculative glance at Peter drooping beside him, his bare legs hanging listlessly instead of drumming against the wagon as usually they did.

'There are still things left in the world, little Peter,' he ventured at last. 'White clouds in blue sky, and flowers in the fields, and Penni on her nest. Also there are other medals in my box, though I admit they are none of them so handsome. Still, you may choose what you like best, and if it will not take the other's place, perhaps in time it will make one for itself and then you will have good luck again. For it's my opinion — and with all deference to the good Saints, too — that most luck, good or bad, has considerable to do with what one's expecting ——'

He paused. Some one was calling to them from far behind.

'Now, who could that be?' He halted Botto and looked back. So also did Peter, though he was rather surprised to find himself that much interested in ordinary occurrences now.

Down the street toward them Rosalie was running. Her full skirts rippled, the fringe of her gay kerchief glinted in the sun.

'Wait, Walter Romany!' she called as she ran. 'Wait, Peter Rosso!'

Now she was beside them, laughing and gasping and holding her sides. 'Oh, Peter Rosso, see what I have found! I was afraid I would not catch you.' She held out her hand, and there lay the silver locket shining up at him!

'Rosalie!' He fairly fell from the wagon in his haste. 'Where did you find it?' And he cradled the precious bit of silver between his palms and laid it lovingly against his cheek.

'In the stable, Peter Rosso, half hidden in a heap of straw,' Rosalie beamed. 'And what are you going to pay me for bringing you such a happy gift?'

Peter considered. 'It should be something very,

very beautiful, should it not?... the best I have... something I do not give to every one...'

'Yes?' said Rosalie, her eyes dancing, and she pursed her pretty lips... 'yes, I am waiting, Peter...'

'I have it! It was something you asked for last night, and I refused; I will show you my Lady of the Locket!'

'Thank you,' said Rosalie, and she looked a little disappointed, but he did not notice that.

'See, Rosalie, isn't She beautiful, my Lady of the Locket?'

Rosalie peeped obediently over the rim of his cupped hands and even Walter Romany stepped nearer and looked, too.

'Oh, Peter Rosso!' cried Rosalie, her mouth a round pink O of admiration, 'I never saw one so beautiful. Is it a halo or only Her hair that makes the light about Her face? And see how She smiles as if the Babe were in Her lap and laughing up at Her! I believe... yes, I believe... She looks a very little like you, Peter — let me see again...'

'No.' Peter closed his fingers over the locket, 'that is enough. I do not mean to be rude, but now that I have Her back, I am so afraid something else will happen.' And he added, 'I must find a new string at once so She may hang about my neck again.'

'And I must be running to my work,' said Rosalie.

But Peter stayed her. 'There is something else,'

he said shyly, 'I might give you, if you like.' And standing on tiptoe he kissed her round soft cheek. 'There! And that is more than I have done for any other woman — including Signorina Ida; but then, Signorina Ida was not the kind to like such silly things.'

Walter Romany meanwhile had turned away and was rummaging through the back of his cart. Now he reappeared, his hands behind him, and a funny little smile twitching at the corners of his mustache.

'Did you say you needed something to hang your locket on?'

Peter nodded. 'A bit of string or ——'

'Pff!' said Walter Romany. 'String! It would only wear out and you'd lose it again, and there'd be all this to-do to go through a second time.'

'But what else is there to hang it on, Walter Romany?'

'You might try *this*,' said the little man, and he held up a beautiful chain that glistened like real gold in the sun.

'Oh, Walter, Walter Romany!' cried Peter in delight, his fingers shaking so he could hardly thread the locket over the slender links. 'But I thought — I thought — you had these chains to sell ——'

'If I could not have spared it, I should not have offered it,' declared Walter the Romany brusquely. 'Would you imply I have lost my eye for business,

boy?' And he made a great show of being abused.

When Rosalie had departed singing in the direction of the inn and they were once more started on their way, Walter Romany said between puffs at his long pipe:

'Didn't I tell you your locket was but lost? You must have caught the string on something that time you went for Penni in the dark.'

'But I tell you I had it round my neck when I came back!'

'You mean you thought you had. It is odd how many times one's memory will lie, be one the most honest man in this world!'

Oh, well, what use to argue further? He had the locket round his neck again; and that was all that mattered.

It was astonishing how much the world had changed now that the locket lay once more warm against his heart. 'Papa Ott' was right,' he exclaimed presently to Walter Romany. 'My Lady of the Locket does make miracles! She has already made one on the day. A little while ago it was not worth looking at and now ——' He flung his arms out as if he would have gathered into them the village in its warm green nest and the broad hills that ringed it round and the blue sky that covered it over.

'I am glad of that,' Walter Romany nodded in approval. 'For in a few minutes now we shall be

entering the Gateway, and, after all this time of looking forward to it, it would be a pity if you had found it not worthy of a glance.'

Very soon, as Walter Romany had said, the white road turned abruptly and headed straight into the hills. Soon their forbidding slopes closed in upon the cart, and a shadow fell across it as if some one had suddenly closed the shutters on a vast window and hid the light within.

'It is the shadow that the Gateway casts,' Walter Romany explained, as Peter peered out a trifle fearfully, for the sudden gloom was an uncanny thing. 'All the year round it lies here except for one day in summer when the sun shines in.'

The road grew narrow and more narrow as they advanced. Ahead of them, the high hills leaned toward each other until Peter wondered how the road would ever manage to push by. But Walter Romany did not seem a bit disturbed.

'Yonder, little Peter,' he said presently, as they approached a curious barrier that seemed to bar all further progress, 'is what is called the Lock of the Gate. There's a story about it, too — something concerning a robber baron who lived in yonder castle.' And he showed him where against the narrow strip of sky rose the grim outlines of a ruined tower. 'So greedy he was he would take toll even of the humble peasants who went this way, therefore he

hired the dwarfs who lived among the hills to build him a barrier which none might pass unless he gave the word.

'But Earth, whose children peasants are, refused to yield herself to such an outrage; the great rocks rolled themselves away when the dwarfs would have piled them up, and even the trees in the forest stiffened their trunks so they might not be cut down, and a barrier made of them. So there was nothing left to use except the snow — which did not care, having a heart of ice — and that they took and built this barrier with, and here it stands until this day, although the baron died many a century ago.'

'But, Walter Romany, does it never melt? And how are we to pass it?'

'Only in the very hottest summer does it melt, and as for passing — man is never stopped for long if he wants to go somewhere, little Peter. After the robber baron died, they made a tunnel through. See — yonder is the entrance to it.'

Peter the Red held his breath as they entered. What if the vast snowdrift above their heads should melt suddenly and fall upon them? And, as if in confirmation of the dreadful thought, an icy drop splashed down upon his nose.

'Walter Romany,' grabbing at his arm in his terror, 'quick! The tunnel is melting on us!'

'It will take more drops than that to bring the

roof down, little Peter. Hold your fears with firm reins for a few minutes longer, and I promise you that you shall have something besides water in your eyes...'

And in a few minutes out they rolled — and found themselves in dazzling sunlight. The shadow of the Gateway was quite gone. Peter had to make his eyes into the merest slit in order to see at all, and even Walter Romany twitched his hat so low that it rested on his nose.

'So — we are through the Gateway at last, little Peter, and the Pale Mountains wait for us ahead.' He pointed, and Peter squinting upward caught his breath for wonderment and joy.

For there, high and *high* and HIGH above him, rose a slender mountain glimmering in golden air. Its peaks were gold with sun and white with snow and splashed with rosy pink until they seemed like a field of fairy flowers, turned by some jealous magic into stone. And he was not at all surprised when Walter Romany beside him said:

'Yonder is the Dwarf King Laurin's Rose Garden which, they say, he planted long and long ago. To-night, if all goes well, we shall sleep high up within its very shadow, and to-morrow there will be more peaks beyond, as fair as this and fairer; and purple valleys lying in between; and villages with steeples like flower buds about to burst into bloom. And

there the folk we'll meet may speak another tongue than ours, little Peter, for this is Border Land we're entering, and in Border Lands one learns to look two ways; love two countries; speak two tongues. It may be an accomplishment, but it has its drawbacks, too, when Bad Days come. For then, whichever way one steps, one must betray a something precious in one's own heart.' Walter Romany sighed and fell silent a little while before he continued: 'There's another tongue I've heard, too, hereabouts, that some say was spoken long before folk learned to pray to Christ and all the gentle Saints. Ladin, they call it; in certain isolated valleys the peasants speak nothing else.'

'Do you think, Walter Romany, it was in one such that those words were said to you?' Peter looked a little anxious. What if he were to hear them himself and not understand, and thus lose the opportunity to discover who he was?

'I cannot tell, little Peter, but do not fret yourself, I shall remember when the time comes, right enough. Some day, and it may be to-morrow for aught I know to the contrary, I shall turn to you and say, "Here is the place those words were said to me!"'

But it was not to-morrow nor the next day, nor indeed for many days thereafter; and presently, as days became weeks, Peter began to lose something of his hope for all Walter Romany's assurances.

One dreary afternoon, a little before sunset time, they topped a snowy pass toward which Botto had climbed wearily all day, and as they started down the other side, the clouds parted, the sun shone through, and there below them showed the fairest valley Peter had yet seen. A little wind dancing on light

feet up the mountain-side carried the faint fragrance of distant flowers to his nose and to his ears the far, sweet cadence of a vesper bell. Suddenly he felt Walter Romany's elbow nudging at his ribs.

'I told you I would remember when the time came,' cried the little man. 'Yonder in that valley those words were said to me!'

CHAPTER VIII

In which Peter the Red Meets Nonna Sunta but Nothing Comes of It

Darkness had already fallen over the valley when Walter the Romany's little cart rolled down the last of the mountain-slope and clattered across a covered bridge which spanned a grumbling stream.

'How is this valley called?' questioned Peter, as a night wind blew in their faces the fragrance of the unseen meadows roundabout.

'Val Rosa,' answered Walter Romany, and he gave a whistle of surprise. 'Why, I do believe that was where your friend Laurin hailed from ——'

'*Friend?*' snorted Peter, and heard the little man chuckle in the dark.

Presently Walter Romany drew Botto to a halt, and began to clamber down over the wheel.

'Are we to camp in the open to-night?' Peter peering about made out the shadowy tops of larch trees

swaying above his head. 'The air feels like rain, Walter Romany.'

'What else has it felt like since we left the Valley Town?' grumbled Walter Romany. 'Rain! Rain! Such a summer I have never seen. Saint John Nepomuck is going to have his hands full keeping his people safe from floods if this keeps on, not to mention avalanches... No, we are not to sleep in the open, little Peter. When I come to Val Rosa I always stop at one place, and if you wish a name for it, call it Cobweb Inn, for reasons you will presently see.'

And with that he made his way toward a dark object which Peter had not noticed before in the night, and which proved to be a crude wooden hut such as the woodcutters built on the mountains.

'It used to be a woodcutter's hut,' said Walter Romany, shoving open the door, 'but no one has used it since the Bad Days except me.' He lit a match and by its sputtering light they looked around. The room was bare of everything but a rusty stove, and, against one wall, a rough wooden bench. 'I left a candle-end here when I went away,' said Walter Romany. 'Ah, there it is; I thought the wood mice would have eaten it by now. There are a few sticks over in yonder corner,' he went on. 'You might make a fire while I — no, come to think of it, I had better make the fire. That stove is like a woman; it

must be managed. Do you go out and tend to Botto. You'll find a little shed at yonder end of the hut into which he will fit, unless he's grown much fatter in a year. And the cart you can draw up outside as close to the wall as possible.'

When Peter returned, he was carrying Penni in her nest. Penni's head was jerking this way and that in alarm, and when he set her down she hopped out at once and ran about the room, croaking indignantly.

'She looked so lonely when I would have left her,' explained Peter sheepishly, as Walter Romany raised his brows. 'Besides, there was no room for both her and Botto in that shed — I swear it. And I thought — I thought it was a good thing to have her where we could keep an eye on her. You know she's been given to running away lately.' Which was true — Penni, in the past few weeks had adopted an abstracted air that was quite unlike her and would wander away by herself without warning, turning up again presently, a most innocent expression on her face, when Peter was all but distracted.

'Perhaps,' Walter Romany had suggested once, 'she is in love.' But Peter had laughed the idea to proper scorn. Hens didn't fall in love, and if they did, wasn't it he who had all her affection? No; more likely it was but a sort of indigestion!

'We-ell.' Walter Romany eyed Penni doubtfully

now as she paused and cocked an eye upward. 'At least, she can do little harm in here, and, if she eats a few spiders, we'll be that much to the good, no doubt.'

When the soft green woods light came filtering through the single dusty window the next morning, Peter the Red awoke to find a bright anticipation filling him. Perhaps to-day was the day he would meet the person, man or woman, who had said those words to Walter Romany; would stand in front of him, and, pointing to his own bright hair and the dimple on his neck, demand, 'Now, tell me by these — who am I?' At which the person, man or woman, would make answer, 'You are a Prince and all this valley is your kingdom.'

Peter wriggled in his blanket. Of course he knew it was but half in fun, yet very agreeable in spite of that. A very small cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, appeared to cloud his brightness for a moment. What if the Person should be Laurin? But he soon dismissed that possibility. If it had been, surely the dwarf man would have given some sign of it before, even if Walter Romany had failed to recognize him, a thing he boasted that he never did. Peter looked at Walter Romany asleep near by and then at Penni's nest in the corner. And with that he forgot all about Persons and Princes and sat up. Penni's nest was empty, and Penni herself was nowhere to be seen.

Puzzled, he looked about the room and discovered that the wind had blown the sagging door ajar. Penni must have stepped outside for a worm or two, instead of spiders, for breakfast. Peter scrambled up and went outdoors to find her. There was no telling when that mysterious abstraction would take her and she wander too far away.

The dew was icy cold on his bare feet, and the air had a sharp, sweet tang to it. All the clouds of the night before had vanished and overhead, where the fine tops of the larches nodded to each other, the sky gleamed a pale cool blue. Peter shivered, and then he drew a deep breath, and something inside of him, which had nothing to do with who he was or why he had come to Val Rosa, made his heart beat fast and set the blood to racing through his body. He was happy and contented, and unhappy and discontented all at once. He wanted to laugh, but a lump rose up in his throat and choked him. He looked at the great pale peaks which soared above him, so high they took his breath. He looked at the pale green larches, and at a spray of wild clematis opening its flowers timidly to the day; and at a butterfly brown and gold that blundered past his nose; and suddenly he threw his arms wide as if he would hug it all, all, tight to himself.

'I love it!' he cried aloud to no one in particular; 'I love it!'

At that moment Penni came stepping delicately out from a tangle of rosebushes. Seeing Peter, she stopped and for the barest instant she might have been said to look embarrassed. Then she tilted her head and, lifting her right foot, began to examine it carefully from all angles. Peter's arms dropped to his sides.

'Penni, what have you been doing?'

Penni did not answer that. She merely lowered her foot, looked about her, and made an elaborate lunge at the brown-and-gold butterfly which had stopped on a clematis blossom. The butterfly floated lightly away, and Penni, looking rather foolish, wiped her beak on the dewy grass.

'*Cocodè!*' she said moving off. 'Come along. There's nothing interesting out here. I'm going in for a spider.'

But Peter the Red was not to be put off. 'You are trying to cover something,' he told her sternly, and pushed the rosebushes aside. There beneath a lichened rock, in a cozy hollow lined with softest moss, lay an egg, plump and brown and warm. It felt good to his chilly fingers when he picked it up.

'Does Penni think we are back at Maria Madelina's that she must hide her eggs?' he grumbled as he followed her into the woodcutter's hut. But Penni was eyeing a little spider which hung by a thread from the roof, and did not appear to notice his reproachful frown.

When, a short while later, they started off for the village, Penni was safely shut up again in the hut. 'I've wedged the door with a bit of wood,' said Walter Romany, 'so she'll not get out this time. And with the crumbs you left her and the spiders, she oughtn't to lack for food till we return.'

The nearer they drove to town the higher rose Peter's spirits. Whenever they passed a peasant on the road, he would nudge Walter Romany — 'Walter Romany, is that the one?' — until the little man advised him:

'Take it a bit easier, little Peter. It may not be to-day that we shall see her (for now I'm here I'm almost sure it was a woman), nor even to-morrow. And even if we should, have you ever thought that she might look at you and say: "That's not the boy I meant at all. The one I meant had a nose that tilted down, not up, and ears that stuck out so, and a face with freckles on it"?'

'Oh!' Peter's face fell. 'Still, there is that matter of the dimple. Not every one would have that, Walter Romany.'

'You never can tell,' returned the other, 'though I must admit it's not the ordinary place for dimples.'

Now they had reached the town. And what a pretty town it was! The first house was pink with blue trimmings and the next was lavender with yellow trimmings and the third was green and white,

and all were fresh and clean as if but newly built, instead of a thousand years before as was the way with most towns.

At last they came to the square, and there Walter Romany halted near the church, a buff-colored edifice with a dark blue steeple swelling out at the top into a big round bud like a gentian. Worshipers were going in and out of its doors or lingering about in the fine warm sun to chat of the fair weather, and soon there was a crowd about Walter Romany's little cart. But though business was good all morning, Peter the Red waited in vain for Walter Romany's warning whisper, 'Yonder she comes, little Peter!' — and gradually his spirits sank down and down. What if Walter Romany had been mistaken after all — and this was not the valley nor the town where those words were said to him? Peter put his arm about Botto's neck disconsolately and leaned his bright head against the little donkey's cheek. Botto, surprised by this sudden affection, wagged his head in some displeasure, for one of Peter's curls was tickling his ear.

Presently Walter Romany, in the act of making change for a sour-looking woman, called to him, 'Little Peter!'

'Yes.' Peter the Red obeyed with less than his usual alacrity, for he surmised that Walter Romany intended to send him again to the bakeshop near by

for change, and the last time he had gone there the baker had grumbled and slapped the money down upon his counter irritably. 'What is it that you want, Walter Romany?'

Walter the Romany jerked his head churchward and spoke from the corner of his mouth: 'Yonder by the church door... That old woman... Unless I am greatly mistaken, boy, she is the one who said those words to me!'

Peter the Red looked. By the church door was a gray old woman in a queer black hat like a witch's hat with the point sliced off, and full skirts, and a scarf folded neatly across her black bodice. On her back she carried a tapering wicker basket with a bundle of wood in it, beneath whose weight she was bent nearly double.

'Call to her,' said Walter Romany, giving Peter a shove, 'or she will get away.'

But a strange and unlooked-for shyness had descended upon Peter the Red. He hung back and kicked at a loose cobblestone with his toes. 'You call her, Walter Romany...'

'Now, by the staff of Saint Christopher!' cried the other in amazement. 'What malady is this that has struck you dumb? For weeks you have dinned nothing else into my ears but "Is this the one?" "Is that the one?" "How soon do you think, Walter Romany...?" and now, when the moment comes...!'

He wagged his head, unable to fathom it, and then he raised his voice and called: 'Here, Nonna... this way, grandmother... one little moment! *Per Bacco!*' as the old woman started slowly across the square. 'She does not hear. Run after her, boy — or has this illness affected your legs also?'

'Is it Nonna Sunta you call?' interrupted the sour woman, who had stood by all this time, an interested witness to the proceedings. 'Then, let me tell you, you only waste your breath. She is too deaf to hear unless one speaks into her very ear and, besides, she is too poor to buy anything of you.'

'But it is a personal matter I wish to speak to her concerning. Some one she asked me to look for, once upon a time...'

'Oh, *that!*' shrugged the sour woman, looking sourer than ever, because her face had sweetened a bit with curiosity when Walter Romany mentioned a 'personal matter.' 'You mean about the boy with hair like a halo? She asks that of every one she meets! She "misses her Fridays," you know.' And to make sure they understood she tapped her forehead significantly. 'Ever since the Bad Days she has been like that. It was the loss of her elder son that did it. He was killed, during the Bad Days. But what else could one expect? Look at me; I lost a father and a husband and *I* didn't lose my mind. As for Nonna Sunta, if you don't believe me,

ask some one else, they'll tell you the same thing.' And with that she flounced off, for she saw that neither Walter Romany nor little Peter was listening to her. They were staring at the corner behind which Nonna Sunta had just disappeared, as if she were carrying their fortune away with her.

Walter Romany roused himself at last and scratched his head ruefully. 'I hate to admit it, but — I'm afraid the sour woman speaks truth, little Peter. The whole thing's come back to me now. It was on the road outside the town that I met Nonna Sunta — last year, was it? — or the year before? — and she looked at me so intently that I called to her; what would she have? But she only shook her head, and inquired if I had seen such a boy as you. I answered that I had not, but if she liked I would keep an eye out for him on my travels. How many years had he? At that her glance fell away and she began to mumble vaguely to herself until I wondered if there was not something wrong with the poor thing's mind. I had started on when I heard her calling after me, "I think... he must have grown a little by now. Will you look?" "Very well," I said, "I will look for him," and with that she thanked me so kindly that I forgot my first impression. Now, however, the more I think of it...' He broke off, shaking his head once more and sighed.

Peter the Red stood quite still beside him, clinging

to a spoke of the high wheel as if it were a treasure he dared not release. A terrible blackness had enveloped him. These words he had pinned his faith to for so long meant nothing. They were but the babblings of an old woman who, as the saying went, missed her Fridays. There had been a boy like that in the next house to Maria Madelina's. The children used to follow him to hear what he might say, and laugh at it. Peter closed his smarting eyes. Not since Maria Madelina had screamed at him that he was not Papa Ott's son had he felt so sorry for himself....

There was a gentle touch on his shoulder, and Walter Romany's voice speaking as from a great distance: 'Now you will stay with me, little Peter. We will go up and down these same hills together every summer time, and if you think my name is good enough... I have never had a son... and...'

Peter opened his eyes and saw to his surprise that the square was as sunny as ever. Botto still nodded over his noonday hay; the gentian tower of the church still bloomed against the sky; Walter Romany still smoked his pipe, blowing from it great clouds through which he peered at Peter. Peter the Red shook his head:

'Thank you,' he said, gulping, 'but I think... if I must be some one that I am not I had rather be Papa Ott's son because he was the first who... that is...'

'Quite right,' interrupted Walter Romany, nodding. 'I had not thought of that, but it will not hinder our journeying together of course — I and you, and Penni to keep the thieves off. And now, run to the baker and get us a good round loaf of bread, before he closes shop for his midday nap.'

Peter the Red did so listlessly, but when Walter Romany offered him his share he turned away. 'I — I am not hungry. And I think I should like to go away... by myself for a little while. I — there is something I wish to do.'

'Very well' — Walter Romany glanced at him shrewdly — 'And you need not hurry back. I can manage this afternoon very easily... Here take this bread, though, and eat it as you go...'

Peter the Red took the same direction in which Nonna Sunta had departed. He had made up his mind to overtake her and make sure for himself that the sour woman spoke the truth. In his heart he felt it for a vain hope, but he must take it, anyway. He had found from the baker, who had been more agreeable when he found that Peter wished bread for once instead of change, that Nonna Sunta lived in a small cottage directly beneath Saint Rosary's Knoll, a round green shoulder which thrust itself out from the base of the great mountain which rose above the town. Cima Banche was the name of the mountain; but it was more like a great hand than a chimney,

thought Peter now, looking up at it as he munched his bread, a hand with four rocky fingers lifted to the sky. There was a thumb, too, a little below them. It seemed to bend menacingly over the town. What if some day it should close down over it as his, Peter's, might close upon an almond he wished to crack?... What would happen then? Foolish fear! Nothing could happen to anything so pretty and peaceful as the village he had just left.

Presently he caught sight of a bent figure toiling up the tilted fields ahead of him. He quickened his steps until he was only a little way behind it. All he had to do was to call out loudly, 'NONNA SUNTA!' and she would turn and see him. But when he tried to do so only a timid squeak came out of his mouth, 'Nonna Sunta!' That horrid shyness had overtaken him again and stolen his voice away.

Suddenly Nonna Sunta paused and slipped the basket from her bent shoulders. Peter, from behind a cluster of bushes, watched with interest to see what she intended to do. Slowly the old woman moved about, stopping now and then to pick up a bit of wood or a dead branch. These she tied into a little bundle and brought back to her basket. Then she moved away again, and a moment later had disappeared from sight entirely.

Peter abandoned his bushes and crawled forward on hands and knees to see what had become of her.

He speedily discovered a level shelf of land cut out, as it were, from the slanting hillside. Nonna Sunta was walking about at the far end of it, where she was naturally hidden from the view of any one on the slope below. As Peter, his head above the long grass, watched her, she stopped and began to gather something which grew in the shadow of a ruined wall. Peter's eyes glinted. So there had been a castle here, once upon a time! Nothing was left of it now but that old wall and half of a ruined tower and a hole grown up with bushes and grass, where once apparently the foundations had been. Presently Nonna Sunta straightened up, her hands full of something green and white and looked about her. Once she reached out and laid her gnarled fingers on the wall, patting its stones as one might pat the head of something one loved... At last she turned and started back toward her basket. Peter flattened himself into the grass like a lizard on a stone, and watched with bright, interested eyes as she approached. He was beginning to enjoy this game of hide-and-seek he was playing. He wondered how long he could keep it up without being seen. A fragrance, powdery and delicious, made him draw a deep breath. They were lilies-of-the-valley that Nonna Sunta held in her hand. She paused — still quite unconscious of his presence — and tied a cluster together with a long blade of grass before she slipped her arms through

the straps of her basket and straightened, groaning a little under its weight. The beads of sweat stood out on her forehead, and as she started away she stumbled heavily. Peter's heart gave a quick throb of sympathy. She needed some one to help her, and, forgetting his game and his recent shyness, he poked his head up from the grass:

'I will carry it for you, Nonna Sunta!'

She started as if she had seen a ghost, and involuntarily she made a quick little cross upon herself to protect her from evil.

'I am sorry,' apologized Peter, for he saw how he had frightened her. 'I — I did not think. You are not sick, are you, Nonna?' in alarm, for her weather-

beaten face seemed quite pale, as she stared and stared at him.

With a sigh she shook her head and would have started on, but he stopped her once more.

'Did you not understand? I will help you carry that!'

'No,' she said, eyeing him warily, 'it is too heavy for a boy like you. Besides, I cannot pay you ——' She spoke in the still far-away voice of the deaf.

'I do not want any pay,' shouted Peter, 'and it is not too heavy. I am unusually strong.' And to show her, he laid his hands upon the straps and before she could protest slipped them from her shoulders. Then, sliding his own arms through them, he straightened and started off, staggering a little, but he set his teeth and gave the basket a jounce to show it was nothing at all for a man like him.

Nonna Sunta led the way to her cottage, throwing over her shoulder at him from time to time her quick sidelong glances. But she said nothing, and as for Peter he found he needed all his breath to get himself and the basket along the sunny path without faltering. Time enough to question her after he put it down. Once Nonna Sunta paused before a wayside shrine and left her flowers before it; then on again they went in silence until at last Peter saw the low eaves of the cottage in the shadow of Saint Rosary's Knoll, and a moment later he dropped his

burden beside its door with a scarcely concealed sigh of relief.

Then at last he would have questioned her. 'Nonna Sunta,' he began, 'who was it you meant ——' But as if she had not heard him she stepped indoors and left him standing outside uncertainly.

In a moment, however, she had returned, something that glittered held tight in her hand. She paused and peered about her uneasily and then, coming nearer, she stared hard into Peter's face. Involuntarily he backed away. 'What — what is it, Nonna Sunta?' for he felt afraid, he did not know why. Mysteriously she beckoned him near and opened her hand that he might see — a pair of golden earrings, intricately fashioned, with a pear-shaped stone hanging from each like a drop of crystallized sunlight. She tried to press them into his bewildered fingers.

'They are yours...' she whispered. 'But you must never tell...'

Suddenly she paused, her eyes widening with fear. Coming up the path toward them was Laurin!

CHAPTER IX

In this Peter Meets a Girl who is Not a Princess

Nonna Sunta's fingers closed over the earrings again and silently she withdrew into the cottage. Peter stood his ground and scowled at his approaching enemy. He was rather enjoying the idea of an encounter with the dwarf man, now that it had been forced upon him.

At that moment Laurin lifted his head and saw him. For a moment he seemed stunned to silence; then he shrugged.

'*Per Bacco!* If it is not the gypsy boy again!' And as Peter did not answer he raised his voice, 'Be off! We have no money for gypsies.'

'I did not come to beg,' retorted Peter, 'and

though I am no gypsy, I had rather a thousand times be one of them than a man so low as to steal from — gypsies!'

Laurin's eyelids drooped. 'I have no liking for back talk from such as you.'

'Perhaps,' said Peter sweetly, 'you have only a liking for what belongs to me, eh? A silver locket, for instance?'

He ducked as Laurin thrust out furious fingers to take him by the neck, dodged by before the dwarf man could turn, and raced down the path, where at a safe distance he paused and put a thumb to his nose derisively.

'Get out! Go your way!' roared Laurin, and he hurled a stone after him. But it whirled harmlessly over Peter's head, and he, with a final wiggle of his fingers, swaggered off down the path.

Once safely out of sight of the angry man, however, he stopped and considered what to do next. The afternoon was barely half gone and besides he had no wish to cross those blazing meadows so soon again, being already too hot with anger for comfort. But he could not return to question Nonna Sunta again for he had seen, over his shoulder, Laurin enter the house with the purposeful air of one who intends to stay awhile — though why he should call on the old woman Peter the Red had no idea. So he turned off at the first little trail that crossed

his path and followed it into the coolness of a larch woods. Presently he was scrambling up the steep slope of Saint Rosary's Knoll where, having reached the top, he dropped upon the moss to get his breath.

Already his temper had cooled considerably. It was hard to keep one's mind on unpleasant things in a larch woods. A squirrel chittered on a branch above his head; from the depths of the woods a cuckoo called three times and stopped; a red strawberry flashed beneath its green leaves near by. Yes, it was very hard to remember unpleasant things like tempers and disappointments.

After a while he got to his feet again. The path still curled upward through the trees and would not let him rest until he saw what lay beyond the next corner... and the next. So it happened that presently he found himself going through a different portion of the woods. The ranks of larch trees had become thinner, their trunks were blasted as by terrible strokes of lightning. Even the ground had been torn by deep gashes or thrown up into irregular humps as if below some giant mole had been at work.

And then without the slightest warning Peter tumbled into a trench. It was not a very wide trench but it was deep and its sides were so straight up and down that he made several attempts before he finally emerged, flushed and towsled and with dust in his eyes. Now who so thoughtless as to dig a

pit like that, right where the unwary must fall into it? Half blinded by dust and indignation Peter stalked on.

And so it came about that he did not see something else before his feet, something coiled and brown lying in the moss.... A stab of pain keen and chilling as an icicle shot up his leg. Startled, he sat down hard upon a stone, nursing his injured foot and looking about to see what he had stepped on. There it still lay, the evil thing, waiting to strike again. Peter bent for a stone to shy at it — and saw that it was no snake at all, but only a piece of rusty barbed wire. He had never encountered such a thing in the woods before. Even fences of stone or wood were seldom met with. Peter eyed the sole of his foot again. A tiny stream of blood trickled across it.

'How did you do that?'

Peter the Red looked up and perceived a girl no older than himself standing beside him. She had a little pointed face and grave eyes set wide apart and hair in two fat braids which crossed in the back. Her dress was poor and dark and patched in places; her neck scarf nothing but a square of plain cloth crossed three-corner-wise upon her shoulders.

Peter answered her briefly and with none too good a grace that he had stepped on barbed wire. 'There it lies! Over there.'

At that she stooped and picking up the offending

piece with gingerly fingers, lifted a near-by stone, and pushed it under.

'Now no one can step on it again. I hate that wire! It is very wicked. Luckily there isn't very much of

it left in the woods, though. At first the sheep were always tearing themselves on it. Let me see.' She bent to examine his foot.

Now why, thought Peter drawing back, did Fate insist on producing women at crucial moments? As likely as not this girl would begin to cry over him. He glanced up to see if the tears had already begun — and found that she had vanished as suddenly as she had come. He could hear her light footsteps pattering away through the larch woods. The sight

of a little blood had frightened her, thought Peter more disgusted than ever, and feeling extremely sorry for himself, he held his throbbing foot and rocked back and forth.

Presently he heard the footsteps were coming back and in another instant the little girl was once more beside him, an earthen jug of water in her hands.

'I have been to the spring,' she said. 'Yes, you may have a drink first if you like.... And now I shall wash the dirt from your foot.'

'Ahi!' said Peter, trying to draw it away after a moment or two. 'It hurts. Is that not enough?'

'No, indeed — unless of course you wish to be like Fabio the woodcutter last year. He had but a prick too, not nearly so deep as yours and he only laughed when people warned him.' She nodded her head darkly. 'Do you know what happened? In another week they were lighting the candles around him! They said his jaws were so stiff you couldn't pry them apart.'

A shiver trickled down Peter's spine. He didn't want to have his jaws pried apart, not he! He tried them surreptitiously. They sounded creaky. So he set his teeth and said nothing more until his foot was as pink and clean as one of Maria Madelina's babies after it had had a bath.

'That is better,' she announced at last. 'One little moment longer now, till I make sure the poison is

quite out.' And before he knew what she was about she had put her lips to the wound. 'There is nothing more to do but bind it up.' She slipped the white cloth from her neck and wrapped it tightly about his sole. 'It is necessary not to get it dirty on the way home,' as he managed to protest at that, 'if you would still escape stiff jaws.'

'How do you know so much, girl?' he demanded, overawed by her competency.

'The grandmother taught me. Also if you tend sheep you have to learn a great deal. You can't help it! And every one in Val Rosa knows about the wire. It was put up during the Bad Days, you know, when these woods were full of fighting.' She sighed a little, 'The Bad Days must have been very terrible. Before them, they say, my mother was always laughing, but afterwards she seldom even smiled until the day she died. My father had been killed in them, you see....'

'So you have nobody either.' Peter eyed her with increasing interest. 'Neither have I. Or at least not so far as I know. Tell me, what is your name?'

'Gina. What is yours?'

'Peter the Red. I come from far away,' he waved his hand, 'from beyond the Pale Mountains even,' and looked to see how much she was impressed.

'I knew at once you were not from Val Rosa,' she told him, settling down cross-legged upon the grass

and propping her small chin on her hands. 'And since you are an orphan too, who do you live with? The grandmother, as I do?'

'I do not have a grandmother. I have no one but Walter Romany and he is not related, though he is very good to me for all of that. We go up and down the hills together and I help him to sell things.'

'Being related is not everything,' said Gina. 'It depends on who you are related to. Now Nonna Sunta is very good to me and I love her very much, but my uncle ——!'

'Is Nonna Sunta your grandmother?' cried Peter in astonishment.

'What makes you say it so?' demanded Gina, coloring. 'I suppose you have heard them say in the village that she "misses her Fridays"! Well, and what if she does? I am *glad* if she cannot remember what must have hurt her so during the Bad Days!'

'I did not mean it that way,' protested Peter, abashed at her vehemence. 'It was only that I had not thought...'

'If you ever saw her,' cried Gina, looking near to tears, 'you would know how gentle she is...'

'I have seen her. I... I helped to carry her basket a little,' as Gina's eyes demanded to know.

'You carried her basket?' She stared at him incredulously, her face slowly lighting, 'That was good of you, Peter! There is no one in the valley who

would think to do that, not even Laurin, who is her own son and ——'

'Laurin — her *son*?' It was Peter's turn again to stare. So Laurin then must be that uncle that Gina had hinted she did not like! No wonder he had entered the cottage as if he belonged there. 'I understand now what you meant about relatives,' he observed dryly.

'I think sometimes,' explained Gina, 'that he is a changeling which the dwarfs left in Nonna Sunta's cradle when she wasn't looking. He is so different from my father.'

'I too have thought he was a dwarf,' cried Peter, 'though Walter Romany insists there are none nowadays.' He looked at her, 'What do you think, Gina? Are there such things?'

She answered slowly. 'Once... I was almost sure I saw, when I was high and high on Cima Banche with the sheep, *something* clinging to that great rock they call the Thumb... But when I looked harder, I could see nothing at all! And sometimes too at night I have heard sounds... like little Voices, and Feet pattering underground. The other shepherds say it's but the frost melting from the summer earth, but I often wonder...'

'Where are your sheep, Gina?' asked Peter after a while, looking round. 'Are they high on Cima Banche now?'

'Oh no, not yet. Yonder they browse on the mountainside above us. Every night I take them back to the village. I like to tend them except when the weather is too bad, which of course it has been most of this summer! But I cannot stop for that. We are too poor and need the money.'

('Poor?' thought Peter, remembering the golden earrings, but he judged it wiser to say nothing of that.)

Gina continued: 'A little later I shall drive them higher, when the snow is all gone from the Sky Pasture. Then it will be too far to take them home at night. But it isn't so lonely staying up there all the time as you would think. Shepherds from other valleys are there with their flocks too. Last year I stayed with Hals Hanzi and his wife from the valley on the other side of Cima Banche. But in the autumn Hals fell from his field while he was harvesting — the rope he was tied with broke — so I do not know if his widow will keep the sheep again or not.'

'But aren't you ever afraid?' She was so small, this Gina, yet for all that so straight and strong and competent. She made Peter almost wonder if he, in her place ——

'Afraid?' She stared in surprise, 'Of what? There's nothing on Cima Banche to be afraid of. Why, I could even climb it in my sleep. I know all its trails by heart. Come up to the Sky Pasture some

time and see for yourself. I'll show you where the biggest edelweiss grows if you will. Only, do not wait until then to come back, please — unless you fear to step on more barbed wire.'

'I am not afraid of barbed wire or anything,' boasted Peter, not to be outdone by a girl. 'Of course I will come again, though I cannot tell how soon. I do not have a holiday every day, you see. But don't you ever come to the village, Gina? Because if there is anything you wish to buy, I will tell Walter Romany and he will make you a very special price ——-'

She shook her head. 'There is no money to buy things like that, Peter. Though I wish I could! I wish I could buy a scarf, a real scarf with fringes to wear around my neck! But as for coming to the village some day — perhaps I shall, on Saint Rosary's *Festa.* That is five days from now, you know. Saint Rosary is our patron saint. If it hadn't been for her, the priest says, the town might have been as wholly destroyed in the Bad Days as the castle above it. If the village folk keep their sheep at home that day, as they usually do, I will come. Will I see you there, Peter?'

'Unless Walter Romany has decided to move on. But if he hears there is to be a *festa.* he will wait, being a good business man.'

A little while later Peter rose reluctantly. 'I suppose I had better start back,' he said, 'for the sun

has already gone behind the mountain and I'm afraid it will take me longer to get down.' He stuck out his bandaged foot and eyed it ruefully.

'I can show you an easier path,' offered Gina. 'You will not have to cross the trench then, which is also an evil thing left over from the Bad Days. More than one sheep has broken a leg in it!'

Peter limped after her and presently she stopped where another faint trail led off through the woods. 'It will take you to the main road from which you can easily reach the village.'

'Wait, Gina, there is something I wish to ask you,' Peter had been turning it over in his mind for some time and now, resolved, he spoke up. 'Do you know why Nonna Sunta always asks about a boy with hair like a Saint's halo and ——?'

'Did she say that to you too? Do not worry, Peter, she meant nothing by it, nothing at all. It is only my father she thinks of. He died far off in a prison camp, but she has forgotten that. She thinks he is still a little boy with hair as yellow-white as cornsilk. Doubtless as the priest says, to her poor mind it makes a glory like that of the Saints above...'

'Doubtless that is it,' agreed Peter, his face fallen. 'It is what the sour woman in the village told us too, but I — I wanted to make sure for myself.'

CHAPTER X

Which Concerns Penni

It took Peter the Red much longer to get down the mountain than it did to get up. Or at least it seemed longer. Every little while the bandage Gina had wrapped about his foot loosened and he had to stop and wind it over again, for he had no wish for stiff jaws like Fabio the woodcutter's. At last with relief he caught sight of a clearing ahead of him. The road could not be far off.... But when he reached the open space he forgot all about the road. For there directly in front of him stood the woodcutter's hut. The accommodating little path had brought him straight home!

Walter Romany wasn't back yet, but Penni of

course would be. Peter hoppity-skipped forward and pushed open the door. Penni would be glad to see him, for spiders, though they might or might not be good eating, were scarcely to be called good company.

'Penni ——' he began and stopped open-mouthed. The room was empty. There was nothing in the nest but one soft curly gray feather.

'PENNI!'

Now where could she be? The door had certainly been tight shut. There was no place in the room for even a bantam hen to hide. And Penni was no bantam, far from it!

Slowly, looking about him in bewilderment, Peter walked into the middle of the room, and all the spiders who had run out on their webs to watch him shrank into their dens again. Had Penni been stolen? But the next moment he understood and his face lightened. The window! They had forgotten all about it this morning, and there were a couple of panes missing. Still, who would have thought — who, that is, not knowing Penni — a hen would have noticed the oversight and managed to squeeze herself through that small space? Considerably relieved, Peter hopped outdoors again and called her imperatively, 'Penni! Oo-ee, Penni! Come here at once!'

But there was no answering fluff of feathers and when he had called again and again to no purpose;

had gone and peered into Botto's empty shed and had even looked behind the rose bushes where he had found her egg that morning, his fears returned stronger than ever, for their respite. Something had happened! Something *must* have happened!

'PENNI!' shrieked Peter so loudly that an echo, a very faint derisive echo, answered him from somewhere up on Cima Banche.

'Softly, softly,' said a quiet voice, 'Penni's not so old she's grown deaf, is she?' and turning, Peter saw Walter Romany's face peering at him over the rose bushes.

'Oh, Walter Romany,' his breast heaved, 'something terrible must have happened to Penni! She climbed out through the window and she is not here; she is not there! She is not anywhere! I have looked!'

'Oh, Penni!' shrugged the little man, 'is that all? She is doubtless walking around somewhere with her head in the clouds. She'll turn up in time for her supper, never fear.'

Yet even as he spoke an odd look crossed his face as if from somewhere a memory had popped up and prodded him. Nevertheless he repeated positively, 'She'll turn up. Now come and help me with Botto, for I noticed as we came home black clouds heaving themselves up behind Cima Banche again. What is that you have about your foot?'

'That is Gina's scarf. I stepped on a barbed wire and she bound it around my foot to keep my jaws from getting stiff.'

'Jaws? Toes, you mean,' corrected Walter Romany, but Peter said: 'No, jaws,' and told him all about it.

And all the time he worked and talked, his anxious eyes roved here and yon in hope of seeing Penni's plump form stroll forth from the underbrush exactly as if nothing had happened. But no Penni appeared.

Presently Botto was safe in his shed, munching on his hay; Walter Romany had a good fire going in the cranky stove; Peter sat on the floor watching him, and the first hint of a coming wind sighed far above their heads. But though Peter strained his ears he caught no familiar sound of scratching outside the door....

Now Walter Romany was unusually talkative tonight. He talked of every little foolish thing that had taken place that afternoon and when these had run out he began on Peter's adventures again.

'No, barbed wire was never made to be stepped on, any more than nettles are! That was a good turn the little sheep girl did you, sucking the poison out.' He looked down at Peter's foot. 'I hope she does not expect her scarf back though. You've surely made short work of it.'

'It was not I,' said Peter. 'It was the sticks and

stones and the thorns on the rose bushes. I... I have nothing to give her in return for it either!' 'Not even an egg,' he thought gloomily, 'if Penni never came back to lay any more!'

'You might,' suggested Walter Romany, 'get her a new scarf.'

'Of course,' Peter jerked his head up, so pleased with the idea that for a minute he almost forgot about Penni. 'Why didn't I think of that before? Which may I have, Walter Romany, the pink one with blue roses, or the yellow one with red roses, and it must have a very long fringe, too. Perhaps,' he added slyly, 'you will make me a good price on it, seeing we have known each other so long...'

The little man chuckled, 'Indeed, and I would make you a very good price, little Peter, if it weren't for the fact that all my scarfs are gone! Have you forgotten that I sold them all at one bargaining?'

'I remember now,' Peter began to grin. 'You had a good eye for business that day, Walter Romany — getting three times the regular price for every one of them!'

'But why not?' demanded the little man guilelessly. 'Surely I deserved something in return for having to go the rest of the summer with no scarfs at all to sell when people asked for them, and if folk want something so badly that they will climb down from one of those autobuses to buy it, one might as

well ask a price worth while. Besides, they were foreigners and therefore rich. Now bring me the eggs from yonder shelf, little Peter, and I will fix you such an omelet as will make your mouth water!'

The mention of eggs wiped the reminiscent smile from Peter's face. Soberly he got them down and handed them to Walter Romany, who broke them expertly into the pan. Peter did not watch the operation as on another day he would have done. Instead he went to the door and opening it a little stood there, staring out at the quickly gathering dusk.

'Penni! Oo... ee... Penni!'

Walter Romany at the call, looked up, that odd look upon his face again, and once he opened his mouth as if to speak, but shaking his head he closed it once more silently.

At last he said: 'The omelet is done to a turn, little Peter... there is nothing more to do now but eat it.'

'I — I am not hungry,' murmured Peter in a dismal voice, but he turned and came back to the stove, and when Walter Romany had given him his share he managed to eat one listless bite and then another until he found to his surprise the golden mound was wholly gone.

Meanwhile Walter Romany's loquaciousness had returned upon him sevenfold. 'What thing ails him?' demanded Peter impatiently of himself, 'I'll

never hear Penni when she comes — especially since the wind is making conversation too in the tops of the larch trees!' And he listened to the sound of the coming rain storm, while beside him in the darkening room Walter Romany talked and talked.

'... and it came around the curve so fast we had no warning at all. We should have been dead if Saint Christopher had not interposed his staff between us and caused its wheels to swerve just in time, so that they hit nothing worse than a luckless chicken.'

'A chicken?' Peter shot straight up, all attention now. 'What — what sort of chicken?'

'I did not notice,' Walter Romany looked confused. ('Now what mischief pushed those words from my mouth?' he muttered, 'when all evening I have done nothing but try to hold them back?') 'It was probably a rooster.'

'You know something, Walter Romany,' accused Peter. 'I can tell it by your face... you know something you don't want to tell!'

'There, there, little Peter, don't look like that. I know nothing — certainly. See, I swear it on my heart!' But when he looked up and saw Peter's eyes wide with fear and hope regarding him, his own gaze faltered and he mumbled: 'I tell you there's no reason to believe... there are lots of gray hens in the valley — even if it was a hen ——'

'It was Penni! It was my Penni!' cried out Peter in anguish, 'It does no good to lie to me, Walter Romany. You know it was Penni! You've known it all along, and you wouldn't tell! You let me call and call...'

He sprang to his feet, and forgetful of his hurt foot, darted to the door and pulled it wide. The wind, rushing in, dashed cold drops of rain in his face. Behind him Walter Romany quietly spoke: 'Where are you going, little Peter?'

'To find her,' he flung back. 'Perhaps she isn't...' his voice broke on the word, 'dead! Perhaps she was only hurt...'

'She is dead, that hen, little Peter, you may take my word for that.'

'You saw her killed and you left her there, my Penni, and you came home pretending nothing had happened.' Peter whirled, his hands clenched, his eyes dry and blazing: 'I hate you, Walter Romany! How I hate you!'

'Softly,' said the little man in a troubled tone, 'for hating is a black and evil thing — I would not wish it on the heart of my worst enemy, let alone some one I... but this is no time to speak of that. If it had once occurred to me that what I saw beneath the motor car was Penni, I should have stopped my cart and brought her home for Christian burial. But it never struck me till I came and found you hunting

her that there might be any possibility it could be she. And even then, so sure I was in my own heart that she would come stepping home unscathed, I decided to say nothing to upset you needlessly. And now the very thing I sought to avoid has happened!' He shook his head, ruefully, 'And at once you would rush out to look for her, in spite of dark and rain and that sore foot of yours.... And to-morrow morning when you wake, no doubt, you'll find Penni scratching for worms as usual outside the door!'

'She will never scratch for worms again,' said Peter miserably, but he slowly came back into the room. 'I feel it in my bones, Walter Romany.'

'I never trust feelings in my bones,' returned Walter Romany. 'They usually turn out to be nothing but rheumatism, though I admit in one so young as you ——'

'Oh, Walter Romany, I cannot bear it if she is dead!' cried out Peter. 'I raised her from the scrawniest chick you ever saw. I had to hold her beak open and put the meal and water in it until, after a while, she grew round and fat and always came when I called until now...' And suddenly he flung himself full length upon the floor, sobbing bitterly.

Walter Romany let him have his cry in silence, but when the worst was over, he rose and knocked the ashes from his pipe, and bending, lifted Peter in

his arms and laid him on his blanket. As he did so, Peter stirred and opened tear-swollen eyes.

'Walter Romany,' 'he whispered wearily, 'I did not mean... what I said... about hating you....'

CHAPTER XI

Tells about the Festa, at which More Things Happen than Peter Expects

For four long wretched days the rain came down unceasingly. Too wet it was for any one to stir outdoors that didn't have to; and Peter and Walter Romany, after the first gloomy morning when they hunted all the roadside ditches which the rain had changed to little river beds, in a vain search for poor Penni's body, sat at home in the woodcutter's hut and watched the spiders at their eternal weaving, and heard the wind whistle through the broken window pane, and Botto stamp impatiently in his cramped quarters outside. Peter's foot grew speedily well again and his jaws remained as limber as ever, but the pain in his breast did not lessen. Penni was dead, murdered by a ruthless motor-car! Penni was dead and there was nothing that could ever take her place.

'I shall never love anything again!' he told himself, picking the one pathetic breast feather that was all that was left of Penni from the empty nest. And he smoothed out the soft curl with fingers that shook and put it inside his silver locket where it lay night and day against his unhappy heart. 'No, I shall never love anything again!' So great was his bereavement that it drove from his mind, for the present at least, all other disappointments.

On the evening of the fourth day the rain stopped and he and Walter Romany ventured a little way up the mountain to fill their lungs with fresh new laundered air. As they watched the breaking clouds climb up the steep ascent from the valley and a shifting wind brought to their ears the tolling of the vesper bell in the gentian-towered church, Walter Romany reminded him:

'To-morrow is the *Festa* of Saint Rosary. We will hitch Botto early so that we can get for ourselves a good place.'

In spite of the fact he intended to be very melancholy, Peter the Red next morning found himself looking about with increasing interest as the crowd grew thick and thicker in the village square. Every one was out in holiday attire, although the promise of the night before had scarcely been fulfilled. The day was cold and raw and the clouds were a dark canopy in which the golden cross upon the church

spire seemed to tear a hole occasionally so that a faint gleam of sunlight might shine through.

But at least it did not rain and every one was determined to be glad. The square was gay with flags; and every balcony and window was full of merry onlookers. And still folk kept arriving, on foot and motor bus and lumber wagon drawn by horses about whose necks hung strings of tinkling bells. From distant valleys they came — women in their best aprons and brightest kerchiefs crossed upon black bodices, and gay ribbons fluttering from full white sleeves, and long black streamers floating out behind their funny little black hats. Their men folk swaggered past in green corduroy breeches held up by embroidered suspenders; a tuft of feathers in their jaunty hats. As for the children, they were dressed exactly like their elders, and had it not been for the difference in size one could not have told which was mother and daughter; which father and son.

'Go and play with them,' urged Walter Romany, as Peter teetered on the high wheel of the cart eyeing a group of shouting boys in the center of the square. 'You stay too much with old folk like me.'

But as Peter would have joined them shyly, the bell in the gentian of the tower began to toll, and there was a general surge forward which swept Peter upon the crest of it, whether he wished or not. So tightly was he caught by the crowd that he could

barely move or breathe and certainly he could see nothing but broad backs all about him. He began to wish he had stayed with Walter Romany, when suddenly he felt himself swung upward through the air and perched, as if he were no heavier than a sparrow, upon the shoulder of a giant peasant.

'Perhaps you will see enough now,' grumbled a gruff voice in the region of his knees, 'and won't have to be dancing up and down on the toes of my best boots!'

What a different view he had! He could see everything! The whole world! There was Walter Romany in his cart and the tips of Botto's mouse-gray ears. There were all the people in the balconies leaning over and calling to their friends; there was the great bell swinging back and forth in its belfry. Yes, and there was Laurin, too, sneaking about on the edge of the crowd, his dark glance weaving this way and that as if in search of some one. Peter craned his neck for some sign of Gina, but though he looked everywhere carefully, he did not see her.

Just then a commotion began on the other side of the square; shouts and much pushing this way and that and the impatient tooting of an automobile horn. Peter scowled. He hated automobiles! Murderers — there was no term too bad for them!

'That is the inn car,' said some one to his neighbor. 'I can tell by its horn.'

The car nosed its way into the crowd and stopped. Its occupants scrambled up on the seats. That was as good as a balcony; you could see almost as well as Peter could from his perch —— But who was that, her fair head nodding like a flower above the crowd? Peter very nearly fell from his perch in astonishment — surely it could be none other than Margaret the Fair!

'Be still,' ordered the giant peasant. 'If you pull my hair again, boy, I shall set you down.'

It had never occurred to Peter that Margaret might be here. It was long since that night they met at the Inn of the Elephant. And to tell the truth, he had been too full of his own troubles since he came to Val Rosa to remember that she had been coming here too. Where was her father, the Signore in gray, wondered Peter ——

'Keep still, I tell you!' said the peasant. 'Only a little moment now and the procession starts.'

'But I want to get down! I want to get down!'

'Very well then, little Grasshopper! Some people, it seems, are never satisfied!' and Peter was dropped to earth with a thud that made his feet tingle. He began to duck in and out through the crowd, pushing and shoving his way toward the car. Once he hesitated, for he had sighted Laurin's squat form not far from him, but in a moment the crowd had closed in between them and he did not see him again.

The bell in the church tower suddenly stopped its tolling. There was a stir in the waiting crowd, and a cry that swelled into a roar. People were pressed back in order to leave a lane down which the procession might pass. Peter found himself on the front row. No use now to try to reach the car. He must wait until the procession was over.

'It comes! It comes!' The cry came rippling down the excited ranks of people and every one craned his neck. In the distance there was a faint sound of music.

'Get down on your knees, boy,' ordered a woman beside Peter. 'Where do you come from that you do not know what is proper to do at a holy procession?'

Now it came in sight, rows of choir boys first in white shirts, chanting; and a glittering cross; and banners blue, purple, and gold; and a massive prelate in lace robes, waddling; and the village priest in his black skirts, long and lean as if the mountains had walked all the fat off him. And at last beneath a gorgeous canopy, the statue of Saint Rosary herself!

Dressed in her best robes was she, like every one else. But hers were made of silk and velvet, and so stiff with gold embroidery they could have stood alone. On one shoulder perched a little silver bird; at her right hand stood a chamois with freshly gilded hoofs and horns, and at her left crouched a bear.

'So she who was a Saint loved live things too,' sighed Peter, a quick stab at his heart as he remembered Penni, and to the woman beside him he whispered, 'But tell me, why did she have a bird, a chamois, and a bear for her pets?'

'Not pets!' exclaimed the woman, quite horrified. 'Holy folk have no time for such things! They are the ones that warned her when the mountain was going to fall. The little bird came first and cried it in her ears as she knelt praying in the woods. And then the chamois came stamping with his hoofs for fear and showed her the way down, for she had prayed so long, you see, the path had grown quite over. And last came the bear and carried her on his back when the stones and thorns had cut her feet so that she could no longer walk. So now she protects us from avalanches just as the good Saint John does from floods. Why, not a hundred years ago that cliff they call the Thumb on Cima Banche threatened to fall when the spring thaws had loosened the ground beneath it, and the priest brought her statue out and carried it up the mountain and at once the landslide halted.'

'But what if,' began Peter skeptically, 'it should forget and start again some day?'

'Are you a heretic, boy, to suggest such a thing? Besides, if a thing has stood a hundred years it's not likely to fall to-morrow, and, if it should, never doubt

'OH, I SAW YOU, YOU YOUNG THIEF!'

but that Saint Rosary would come to our rescue once more.'

'And she may need to!' put in another woman who had been listening with all ears to the tale. 'Not in a hundred years, they say, has there been such a summer as this. Nothing but rain and rain ——'

The procession passed and the crowd began to break up once more, jostling each other good naturedly. Some followed it on its way about the town, but for the most part they waited in the square for its return to the church. Peter the Red began once more to push his way toward the motor-car whose broad red back he could just see above the shoulders of the crowd.

He had almost reached it; had even opened his mouth to call a greeting, when without warning two fingers pinched his ear as they had done before back in the Valley Town. This time, however, Laurin's knee did not send him spinning in cartwheels down the street. Instead he held tightly to the ear in spite of Peter's squirming and cried so every one could hear it:

'Oh, I saw you, you young thief!'

'I have done nothing,' protested Peter. 'Let me go!'

'Why do you squirm like that if you've done nothing?' Laurin turned to the throng about them. 'It's not the first time either I've caught him picking pockets!'

'What is this? Let me pass, I say! What thing is this?' The crowd opened and through it came strutting a policeman in three-cornered hat and white gloves, and a sword that clanked at every step. To Peter's despairing eyes he stood as high as the church tower itself. 'Who is this you've got by the ear?'

'It's a gypsy boy,' said Laurin, giving the ear another tweak. 'He was stealing foreigners' purses.'

'Gypsy!' muttered several voices in the crowd, and it swayed a little nearer, menacingly. 'We're tired of gypsies in this valley. Run him out of town, policeman! And do it so well that he won't come back...'

'But I am no gypsy, denied Peter as loudly as he could, 'and I was not stealing anything. See, I swear it — I was only ——'

'What price for a gypsy boy's word?' sneered Laurin, and the crowd muttered again in sympathy. 'At the Valley Fair I caught him trying the very same trick and a few days ago I found him hanging suspiciously about our cottage.'

'Come along,' said the policeman grasping Peter's arm, 'and do not try to escape or I shall have to hurt you.'

'You are hurting me now,' objected Peter, but nobody paid any attention to him. The policeman clanked his sword and the crowd pushed back to let

him pass with his prisoner, when suddenly above their heads a girl's voice cried:

'Why, that is Peter the Red! I know him! Peter, where are they taking you? What has happened?'

'Margaret!' Peter, with a sudden twist, wrenched his arm free and darted to the automobile before the policeman could stop him. 'Margaret! Laurin says I stole your purse in the Valley Town. He says I was trying to steal it here. And I was not, I swear it; I only wished to speak to you... I was so glad when I saw you again... *Margaret!*' as the policeman tried to pull him away.

'Let him alone!' cried Margaret, stamping her foot at the astonished policeman. 'You will make his arm black and blue, you brute.'

'But Signorina ——'

'He is a friend of mine! Let him alone!'

'But Signorina, there must be a mistake. He is only a poor gypsy and ——'

'What if he is?' Margaret tossed her head, 'I like him, and he never stole anything from me. I guess I know that better than Laurin!'

At that the crowd seemed to have a difference of opinion. Voices rose here and there in argument and there was considerable babble. Laurin stepped up to the side of the car. His eyes were angry but his voice was soft:

'Signorina, forgive me. It is only that I am

zealous to protect you from harm while your father is from town, and this boy, you can take my word for it, is a mischief-maker, in spite of his cherub's face —— Besides, it is not wise to interfere. The crowd is in no mood to trifle with gypsies. They have already suffered too much from their light fingers this year.'

'And I say,' Margaret lifted her chin imperiously, 'that I do not care! You must let him go at once. If you don't' — she shook her finger at the bewildered policeman — 'I shall write to a friend of mine who is the daughter of the Chief of all the police in Rome, and *he* will tell the Duce...'

'Ah, Signorina, have mercy,' pleaded the poor policeman. 'I only try to do my duty. And I have a wife and nine children, Signorina — Oh, Signorina, not the Duce...!'

'Then you'd better let go of him at once,' returned Margaret, her chin still tilted, and the policeman did so.

'Are you also going to let the gypsy boy go where he wills?' demanded Laurin of his neighbors, but his answer was only an uneasy shuffling of feet.

'After all, if he has stolen nothing...' 'and the pretty Signorina wishes it...' 'the Duce's displeasure is not a light thing.' 'I know of a case ——' Voices rose here and there.

'Cowards!' said Laurin and turned his back on them.

At that moment there began another commotion, and a rough voice was heard demanding of the crowd, 'Let me through! It is my boy who is in here. Let me ——'

'Walter Romany!' Peter lifted his hand in a glad hail as the little man, his hat pushed back and his hair disheveled, came panting up.

'Here I am, little Peter. What thing has happened now?'

'Do you know this boy, then?' The policeman turned in evident relief to Walter Romany.

'*Know* him? Who better? Haven't we traveled together the whole length of the Pale Mountains? And I'll vouch for his honesty with my own.'

At that the crowd, already wavering under the influence of that dread word, 'Duce,' switched over to the other side without more ado.

'If I'd known it was Walter Romany he belonged to...'

'None would speak of him in the same breath as ordinary *gypsies*.'

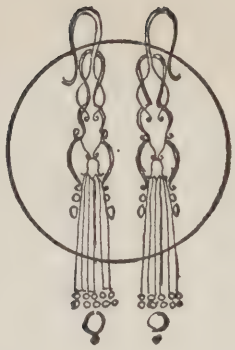
'Why didn't you speak up, boy, and say...?'

'Oh, Walter Romany,' called out a man, 'don't get away from Val Rosa before my wife orders another christening dress ——'

'And Walter Romany,' shrilled a young woman, 'will you buy me some more ribbon, such as you got me last year in the Valley Town? Do you remember?'

'*Carità!*' said the policeman. 'So that's that! I'm glad for the sake of the wife and nine children. Stand back everybody now. Stand back, I say! The procession is returning. Stand BACK!'

'Come and see me to-morrow,' whispered Margaret the Fair under the confusion to Peter, 'I'm at the inn. There's nobody there but me and I am very lonely!'



CHAPTER XII

In which the Lady of the Silver Locket Begins to Work her Miracle

'I think,' said Peter ruefully, as he and Walter Romany drove home from the *Festa*, 'that my Lady of the Locket must be angry — ever since I came to Val Rosa I have had nothing but trouble and disappointment.' And he sighed very heavily indeed. 'Perhaps we had better leave, Walter Romany, before worse befalls us — though indeed I cannot think how it could be much worse...'

'In that case,' returned Walter Romany from behind his pipe, 'we might as well remain... Besides, you would have no one think we were frightened away, would you?'

'No!' said Peter violently, and he added, 'But I will never, never put thumb to my nose at anybody again, Walter Romany. Perhaps that is why Laurin was resolved to make so much trouble for me in return.'

'Certainly,' answered Walter Romany, thoughtfully puffing, 'the resolution is a good one, little Peter. It does not pay to be impolite, even to one's worst enemy. You but offer them a whip with which to lash you later. Still... perhaps that was not Laurin's only reason for accusing you falsely.'

'Then what ——'

'He might have wished to get you out of Val Rosa,' said the little man, 'for that reason he set the townsfolk against you,' and he added in a musing tone as if he thought aloud, 'Laurin lives with Nonna Sunta... Now I wonder if there is any connection...'

'I do not follow you, Walter Romany,' said Peter, frowning in bewilderment.

But Walter Romany did not enlighten him. Only when they were back at the woodcutter's hut again did he break his silence.

There he said: 'Once you let me see the Lady you wear about your neck, little Peter. Will you, for a favor, do so again?'

Wondering more than ever, Peter drew forth his silver locket. 'Be careful, Penni's feather is within,' and as Walter Romany opened it and stared long at the lovely face it held, 'What is it? Why do you look at Her so?'

'Tell me,' Walter Romany snapped the locket shut and returned it to him, 'did you ever look at your Blessed Lady when you had a mirror handy?'

'No — but why?'

Walter Romany shrugged, 'Only a fancy of mine, little Peter, but on some windless day go find yourself a clear pool of water and look. Perhaps you may notice something ——'

'Is it some new sort of miracle, Walter Romany?'

'Who knows?' responded the little man. 'It may be.'

On a morning of bright sun and dark cloud some eight days later Peter the Red went hurrying along the road to the town. Two things were on his mind: to buy a scarf for Gina, and to call upon Margaret the Fair. He had been far too busy, up until now, for either. Every morning early Botto had been hitched to the little cart and started down the road, but not to the village. Instead they had visited the scattered farms that perched upon the mountain slopes, looking as if a good wind would send them sliding downhill. After that they had ventured further into a neighboring valley, where they had done much good business among the isolated hamlets on its steep slopes. And every night they had returned to the woodcutter's hut to sleep.

Now yesterday it happened that Walter Romany, jumping down from the high wheel of the cart to lead Botto around an awkward lumber wagon they had met at a bad corner, had slipped and wrenched

his back so that, although he had made light of it at the time, he had awakened this morning far too stiff to hobble forth.

'I am not an old woman that needs to be nursed,' he grumbled as Peter in alarm had pattered about to wait on him, 'even if I do walk like one. Put the food here, little Peter, and the fuel there, where I can reach them, and then take yourself off and let me enjoy my pains in solitude. Besides it looks as if it would be a fair day and when God gives us such this summer it behooves us not to ignore His gift or He may not repeat it!'

First he would buy the scarf for Gina's neck. His face twinkled with anticipation. He had not seen Gina either in all this time. For some reason he had missed her at the *Festa*. How surprised she was going to be when he put his gift into her lap ——! Blithely he entered the first store, and a moment later left it on lagging feet. There was not a scarf to be bought for less then twelve lire and he had... two! He went from store to store but met with no more success.

As he stood vexed upon the threshold of the last one, wondering what next to do, who should come lightly down the street, but Margaret the Fair herself? She stopped when she saw him and first she smiled and then she pouted.

'I looked for you all that day and the next, but

you never came! After I had saved you from the policeman too, you might at least have been grateful!'

'I was,' he assured her, 'but I am a business man, and business men cannot always have holidays when they want them to go calling on their friends. I came the first moment I was able. I was on my way now.'

'Then perhaps I shall forgive you, if you will play with me the rest of the morning. I am so tired of being here all by myself and father writes that he will be in Paris for two weeks more, and Madame Faraigo who keeps the inn will not let me out of her sight!'

'But aren't you out of her sight now?'

She giggled. 'I tiptoed out when no one was looking, but soon she will be sending Pinky the Porter — I call him so on account of his pink cheeks — out to find me if I don't hide somewhere.'

'Where can you hide?' doubtfully.

'Lots of places — the ruined castle, for instance. Do you know where that is?'

She tilted her fair head at him and something tinkled and gleamed like sunlight on her ears. It was the golden earrings!

'Where did you get those things?' he demanded in astonishment.

She put her hands over her ears, her cheeks flush-

ing guiltily. 'I tried them on this morning to see how they looked and I... I suppose I forgot to take them off. What's the matter, Peter?' — as he still frowned — 'don't they please you? They make me look so nice and grown-up,' and with that she took her fingers down and turned her head this way and that, so he could admire the effect.

'They are well enough if you like such things,' said Peter in a superior tone, 'but how did you happen to get them?'

'You're a very curious boy, Peter,' reproved Margaret. 'What difference does it make how I happened to get them?' But a moment later she told him, 'Father said I should buy them from Laurin.'

So that was who they had belonged to! Well, he was gladder than ever he had refused them of Nonna Sunta; or he'd doubtless be in jail now trying to explain how he got them. And how, he wondered, had Laurin come by such jewels? Oh well, it was none of his affairs...

Here Margaret broke in on his reflections impatiently, 'Are we going or are we not? I'm expecting to see Pinky almost any time ——'

'Going where?' Peter was still half submerged in his own thoughts.

'To the castle, I said. Can't you understand your own language, Peter? Or do you want me to teach you English? That is a good idea! I *shall* teach you

English. We might have the first lesson to-day. How would you like that, Peter?'

'I don't know,' returned Peter, and he gave her a crafty look. 'How much will you pay me to learn?'

'Pay you? The idea! And here I was offering to do it for nothing! If father could hear you now he would not think you so different from other foreigners.'

'I'm not a foreigner,' Peter corrected her indignantly. 'You are. And certainly I cannot see why *I* should pay for something *you* wish to do; however, no doubt it is a foreign custom. I am sorry, though, for at present I am very much in need of some money ——' and he sighed.

'What do you need money for — clothes?' Margaret eyed him. 'I can't say I blame you ——'

'There is nothing wrong with my clothes,' exclaimed Peter. 'No, it is for something quite different,' and he told her hastily about Gina. 'And since I spoiled her scarf with my foot, I wished to buy her another, but... I didn't know anything could cost so much —— Twelve lire for the very cheapest... and I have only two!'

'I will give you the ten. I did not understand ——'

'But if it is not the custom to pay for learning...'

She smiled upon him. 'Then we'll make a new custom, or wait a moment — let's pretend I'm a tourist and you a guide and I'll hire you to show me

all the antiquities, just as they do in Rome. I'll pay you ten lire for it — how is that?'

So the bargain was struck at once and they scampered out of town before Pinky the Porter should overtake them. Presently, however, they slowed up, for the sun was warm and the path to the ruined castle very steep.

'I had forgotten it was so far,' gasped Margaret, pulling her blue béret from her warm head. 'I was here with my father. He used to know the people who lived here long ago...'

'Were they Princes or Knights?' Peter inquired, duly interested.

'Neither. They were Americans.'

'But you also are from America,' Peter pointed out, 'and from the very first, I knew you for a Princess.'

'Did you?' She looked gratified. 'But I'm not, you know. There are no such things in America.'

'Then I should not like to live there,' said Peter, with conviction. 'Imagine not being able to think that perhaps you were Royalty in disguise!'

'Do you think you are a Prince in disguise, Peter?' Her eyes glinted mischievously.

'You can never tell,' said Peter. 'Sometimes I am quite sure of it and sometimes... I am not so sure. Wouldn't you be pleased, Margaret, if I should turn out to be a Prince in disguise?'

'You won't,' Margaret assured him easily. 'Besides, princes aren't popular any more. You'd better pretend to be something else.'

By now they had reached the shelf of land on which the Castle had once stood. Margaret perched herself on a ruined wall and stared down at the grass-grown foundations.

'You'd think to look at it, it had been deserted for centuries... Oo! See the frog splash into that pool of water down there!' She gave a quick shiver. 'I hate frogs!'

'How much rain we have had,' observed Peter leaning on his stomach to watch the muddy circles widen, 'to make a pool large enough for a frog to live in!'

'Yes, and Madame Faraigo says it is not over yet.' She stared up at silent Cima Banche looming high above them. 'When the cloud clings like that to the Thumb it is always a sign of rain.' She got down from the wall. 'I am going to pick flowers, Peter, come and help me.'

'Nonna Sunta found some lilies-of-the-valley up here once. I saw her...'

'I am glad she isn't up here to-day. She makes me creep too, though not the same way a frog does. Her eyes stare past as if they didn't see you!'

They found nothing but a few brown strands of lilies left. The season was past. Disappointed,

Margaret began to wander about in search of the commoner ranunculus and johnny-jump-ups. 'I wish I could find something interesting like edelweiss,' she said discontentedly, gathering a gay bunch.

'That does not grow in fields,' Peter told her. 'Gina is going to show me where it is, when she goes up to the Sky Pasture.'

'Oh, Peter, then *I'm* going with you! Imagine being able to write the girls I'd actually picked edelweiss. Even Thea didn't do that and she was in Switzerland all last summer.'

'It would be too hard a climb for a girl like you,' objected Peter.

'I can do anything you can,' she cried. 'I'm not afraid of anything... except one thing, and that's a thunderstorm! Peter, I must go! I shan't speak to you again if you don't take me!'

'I will ask Gina,' promised Peter at last, 'and see what she says.' And though Margaret pouted, nothing more could she get from him.

'Tell me, Peter, where have you been since I saw you weeks ago at the Inn of the Elephant?' They sat once more on the wall while she sorted her flowers.

'Everywhere! There is not a pass in the Pale Mountains that I have not been over.'

'You must have had lots of adventures,' enviously.

'Yes, but,' he sighed, 'we have had the most of them here in Val Rosa and they have all been unlucky.'

At that she insisted on hearing about them and so he told her, from the dimple on his neck that meant nothing at all to Penni's disappearance.

'Let me see your dimple —' Margaret's earrings danced as she bent to examine it. 'How strange! Still lots of people must have dimples. I'm sorry you lost your hen. Why don't you get a dog next time? They're so much cleverer than chickens anyway. We had a dog at our school in Rome. He was a police dog and he was the sweetest thing. We called him Doghino.' She went on about Doghino and his sweetness as if there had never been a Penni in the world. Peter frowned. He had thought she would understand because she had once met Penni — and so he had told her and she talked of nothing but the sweetness of Doghino!

When the flowers were sorted, Margaret said, 'Now we shall begin that English lesson ——' She peeped at the watch on her wrist and sprang up with a cry of surprise and alarm.

'I never dreamed it was so late. I must go back at once or I shall be late for lunch!' She caught up her béret and started off at a run, Peter at her heels. The English lesson was quite forgotten. '*Mamma mia!* Madame Faraigo is going to be angry!'

Peter caught up with her. 'If you go so fast you will presently fall on your nose —' he began, and then — 'Margaret! But where is your beautiful earring?'

She put up her hand in alarm. 'Why, here it is, Peter ——'

'No, the other one ——'

It was gone. Margaret's eyes grew dark with dismay. 'We'll never be able to find it in this grass, never, never! Oh, what will father say? Because it's his, you see, not mine. I shouldn't have put them on, but I wanted to and ——'

'We will go back,' said Peter, breaking in on her wails. 'We will look everywhere carefully. You had them both when you sat there on the wall sorting your flowers. Perhaps that is where you dropped it. I will hurry back and search while you follow more slowly lest it be lying somewhere in the grass... And do not cry or you will not see it, Margaret!'

But the wall, when Peter reached it, was empty except for a white butterfly that floated idly away as he approached. Peter searched everywhere but he could find no trace of the earring. Yet surely it could not be far away unless it had taken wings like the butterfly and floated off. He leaned over the wall and peered into the gaping hole that had been the cellar of the castle. Something bright was lying half hidden by a clump of pansies....

'I've found it!' shouted Peter and jumped down. The tiny blue and yellow pansy faces nodded to each other in surprise as his fingers groped among them for the earring. The frog who had crawled out into the sun again went into his pool with a splash.

Peter grinned at him. 'You thought I was after you, did you?' He leaned over the pool to see him, but so still did the rascal sit that Peter could make out nothing but his own face staring back at him from the smooth surface of the pool.

Suddenly he pulled at the chain of his locket. What was it Walter Romany had told him? 'When you come to a pool on a windless day...'

Opening the locket he peeped first at the lovely face within and then at his own below him in the

water. He could see nothing remarkable except... except that the face in the water and the face in the locket looked very much alike....

'Peter, what are you looking at?' So engrossed had Peter been that he had not heard Margaret follow him. She was peering over his shoulder at the locket in his hand. 'Where did you get that?'

'Nothing! It is mine!' answering both questions. He snapped the locket shut and scrambled to his feet. 'Why? What do you want to know for?'

'Because,' she stared at him uncertainly, 'because I am almost sure... we have a picture like that... only much larger... on our wall at home.'

CHAPTER XIII

In which it Becomes Plain to what Lengths Laurin will Go

The woodcutter's hut was thick with pipe smoke when Peter stepped inside. From the midst of the haze Walter Romany's voice addressed him mildly: 'I had begun to think you had fallen foul of the police again, little Peter.'

'I have been shopping,' said Peter and displayed a package. 'Open it and see if it is a good choice, Walter Romany.'

Inside the gay pink paper wrappings was a scarf of soft wool. It had bright red roses on a black background and a long red fringe.

'Fifteen lire the man wanted for it,' boasted Peter, 'and said he would take not a soldo less — but I finally got it for nine.'

'Nine?' cried Walter Romany, 'for *that*? Yet they call the gypsies thieves!' He rolled his eyes heavenward. 'And where did you get the nine lire to pay the scoundrel?'

'I earned it,' answered Peter, somewhat crestfallen. 'But tell me, Walter Romany, don't you think that Gina will like it?' and he reached out a finger and let the red fringe slide over it coolly.

'Like it? I should think so! It is beautiful, but the *price*...'

'If you think she will like it, that is all I care,' Peter's brow cleared. 'And now I will tell you how I earned the money.'

'And, Walter Romany,' he finished, 'I found a pool and I looked at myself and the Lady of my Locket in it.'

'Ah, and what did you find?'

'Nothing except that I looked a little like her, I thought, but perhaps I was mistaken; and oh, yes, Margaret came and peeped over my shoulder while I was looking and cried out that they had a picture just like it at their home in America, only it was larger. I told her she must have been mistaken, because this Blessed Lady was mine and no one else could share her.'

'Peter, little Peter,' Walter Romany shook his head at him, 'I should have told you to look for a selfish face in that pool! Could your Lady not take

care of more than one little child? And what is an ocean or two to Her? Surely it would not be so strange if some one had seen your Blessed Lady elsewhere... And yet, perhaps,' he added after a pause, in a musing tone, 'perhaps it is a little strange too...'

'How strange... Walter Romany?'

'I do not know. Doubtless I indulge in foolish fancies, but it was in my mind that perhaps your Lady had begun to work a miracle for you.... But now let me tell you my news. I had a visitor this morning, while you were away.'

'A visitor — who?'

'Laurin.'

'LAURIN! What did he do here?'

'I have told you — he came to pay a visit,' Walter Romany twinkled at the look on Peter's face. 'Truly, I begin to think we have done him an injustice, calling him so ill-tempered. A fairer-spoken fellow I have seldom talked to. You would have thought I was a grand Signore instead of a poor peddler and a gypsy to boot.'

'It was for no good reason, then, if he was polite,' declared Peter darkly. 'Are you sure he stole nothing?'

'On the contrary. He offered me five hundred lire.'

'Five hundred...' Peter very nearly fell over

backward. 'But what do we have that he would pay five hundred lire for?'

'Oh, he did not wish to pay so much,' Walter Romany pulled on his pipe with evident enjoyment. 'He began at one hundred and came up. It was nothing he wished to buy from us either — it was something he wished us to do; namely, to leave Val Rosa at once.'

'Leave Val Rosa...' Peter sprang to his feet. 'I should have thrown the money in his face!'

'That would have been no way to treat five new hundred-lire notes, and not counterfeit ones either.'

'But... Walter Romany... it was only a few days ago... you yourself declared no man could drive you out... until you were ready...'

'And now I am ready,' declared Walter the Romany calmly. 'We leave to-morrow at dawn — that is, if I can get these bruised bones of mine to move.'

Peter the Red stared at him speechlessly for a moment, then he stooped and swept up Gina's scarf in its pink wrappings and started for the door.

'Where are you off to now?' inquired Walter Romany in the same mild voice.

'To see Gina,' he answered, 'and tell her good-bye, since I shall not be back again.'

'I said nothing about not coming back, did I?'

'Then why...?' Peter turned and stared at him. 'I do not understand.'

'Doubtless,' agreed the little man dryly, 'when you will not wait long enough to hear me finish my tale.'

Peter came back slowly and sat down upon the floor. 'I will wait,' he said. 'Finish it now, Walter Romany.'

'Very well then,' Walter Romany paused to light his pipe again and Peter thought he caught the suspicion of a smile beneath his shaggy mustache. 'You see, this Laurin had me to understand that he could not rest at night so long as we were in the valley, especially since the Signore who is the father of this little American girl might return at any moment.'

'He told you that?'

'Oh, no — not in so many words; but when one is a peddler one learns to read between words, little Peter. For it is there lie men's true thoughts which their mouths do not express. That is why there is no one can beat me in a bargain. That is why also, for all of Laurin's soft phrases, I understood the fear that bored into his heart as a worm bores into soft wood ——'

'But why should he be afraid?'

'Why, I am not sure — yet; though perhaps if I smoke a few more pipes over it I may discover.'

'He need not be so anxious. Margaret the Fair says that her father will not return for another fortnight.'

'Good. I was about to suggest you find that out from her. It was one thing I could not manage to surprise from Laurin,' murmured Walter Romany in a regretful voice.

'But still, Walter Romany,' said Peter uneasily, 'you should not have taken his bribe. Why could you not have refused to go?'

'If I had done so, his suspicions would have leaped to flame at once. He tried to make trouble for us once in the town. A second time he might succeed and if the police drove us forth it would not be so easy to return again. As for his money — I did not say I took it, did I? I merely said he offered it. I am not so poor that I have need to sell my conscience, yet. Being an honest man, as I told him, I intended to move on to-morrow morning anyway and it would be a shame for him to waste his money where it wasn't needed. That impressed him, for he is not one to let coin escape his fingers easily.' Walter Romany chuckled to his pipe. 'And seeing him so relieved, I had not the heart to tell him I intended to return.'

'He probably had the five hundred lire from the sale of the earrings.' Peter, looking a little sheepish at his hasty conclusion, hastened to speak of something else. 'How do you think he comes by such things, Walter Romany?'

'Not honestly, I warrant!'

'Perhaps he got them as he did my silver locket!' cried Peter. 'Could you have seen his face that day I accused him of it, you would not think my suspicions so ill-founded any more!'

Walter Romany shrugged. 'I don't know; you may be right. It is very strange.' And he filled his pipe again.

Gina was not in sight when Peter reached the summit of Saint Rosary's Knoll that afternoon. He called and presently in answer came a cheerful yodel echoing down through the larchwoods. A minute later he saw her lithe little figure balanced on a great

rock that had made for itself a little clearing among the trees. Peter hid his pink parcel behind his back as he came up.

'I'd begun to think you had gone away,' said Gina reproachfully, and looked at his feet. 'You haven't stepped on any more barbed wire, have you?'

'No!' Peter's eyes danced with his secret. 'But where were *you* the day of the *Festa*? I looked and looked ——'

'I wasn't there.' A shadow fell across her face. 'Nonna Sunta was... not well and...' Suddenly she burst out: 'It was Laurin's doing! He pushed her so she fell and struck her head. She was in bed for two days! And it has made her act stranger than ever!'

'But why should Laurin touch her — a poor old woman like that?'

'He was angry at something. He wouldn't say what. But I think it had to do with his not finding something where he left it. Laurin does not like any one to touch his things, and once in a while Nonna forgets. How can she remember that when she remembers nothing else?'

Gina looked so unhappy, that Peter without more ado drew his hands out from behind his back and shoved the parcel at her. 'Here! I brought this for you.'

'For me?' She looked at it as if she were afraid to open it.

'Open it and see,' directed Peter and he sat down on his heels to enjoy the effect of his surprise in comfort.

Gina sat down too and slowly, very slowly she opened the crackling paper and found the scarf.

Peter hugged himself with satisfaction as wonderingly she unfolded it and the red fringe cascaded over her brown hands. 'It is beautiful, isn't it? I chose it all by myself... It was a very expensive one, too. Why, Gina, don't you like it?' For he suddenly noticed that her face was all twisted up. 'Gina, what's wrong with it?'

'Nothing,' said Gina. She managed with a great effort to untwist her face, 'I... I just tried to smile... and... and my face wouldn't work right. Oh, Peter, it's lovely.' She laid the soft folds against her cheek and rocked back and forth happily. 'It's the loveliest Loveliest I ever saw! I — I can't believe it's mine to keep. I think I am in a dream and must wake up. ... Is that true, Peter?' anxiously.

'No,' Peter assured her, 'You won't wake up — but why don't you try it on?'

She obeyed, throwing it over her shoulders and crossing it in front over her dark dress. It was delightful to see how the red roses were reflected in her cheeks. 'How does it look, Peter?' She turned round and round like a kitten trying to see for herself.

'Perfect! Now all you need is a red apron to go with it, and a black hat with long streamers, and a silver hairpin in your hair ——'

Gina sighed. 'If you think the scarf will be lonely without all those things you had better return it to the store at once.'

The rest of the afternoon they sat contentedly and chatted, while Gina knitted, and the sheep browsed near by, and Peter amused himself by shying the dry seedpods of some last year's flower at an angry squirrel above his head.

'Next week,' said Gina, very busy and matronly, 'I go up to the Sky Pastures. Hals Hanzi's wife will be there so I shall stay with her. In that case I shall have lots of company, for she has five children. We shall all have to sleep in one bed!' She giggled.

'If you have lots of company you won't need me to come up and see you then.' Peter looked crestfallen.

'But of course I shall! And didn't I promise to show you where the biggest edelweiss grows? When will you come?'

'Not next week, but the next perhaps. In ten days, let us say. And may I bring with me that American girl I told you of?'

'I don't know,' doubtfully, 'I never saw a foreigner. I think I should be afraid of her.'

'Pff!' said Peter, 'I'm not afraid. I know how to

talk to her. You just watch me. After all, you know, she is only a girl ——'

'Indeed!' retorted Gina with spirit. 'Doubtless she thinks *you* are "only a boy"! Very well, bring her if you like. Since she is only a girl, she and I may be company for each other!'

'I did not mean it that way.' Peter had grace enough to look ashamed. 'It slipped out. Please don't be angry with me, Gina.'

And he grinned at her so ingratiatingly that she had to laugh. 'Of course I am not angry. How could I be after this?' And she patted the gay scarf on her shoulders.

'Do you think,' asked Peter after a minute, 'we'll see the dwarf you once spoke of up on the Sky Pasture? I want to ask him where that castle is the dwarfs were supposed to have built for me...'

'You'd better not,' Gina warned him. 'He might say it was the one down there, ruined by the shot and shell of mortals!'

'Still even that would be something definite!' He sighed. Certainly everything was against him! And before he knew it he was telling her all about Penni. 'If you had known her,' he finished bitterly, 'you would understand what makes me feel this way!'

'But I do understand, Peter, I do!' Gina's knitting had dropped in her lap. 'You see I... I owned a little kid once that had lost its mother. And no hen

was ever as foolish as a kid can be! I named it Agnes, after the Saint, you know, and it used to suck milk from my finger and follow me everywhere bawling at the top of its voice until Laurin cried that he would silence that kid if I did not.... I did not know Laurin as well then as now, or I should not have laughed in answer!

'The rest is too bad to tell, Peter, but... but one day I came home to find him eating a most excellent stew... He grinned and wanted me to have some of it...' She paused. 'Afterwards when he saw how sick I was I think he was a little ashamed of himself, for the next day he brought home a kitten and dropped it in my lap. Its eyes were not open yet and it crawled about on its stomach shaking and mewing. I screamed until he had to take it away again.'

'I wonder you ever spoke to Laurin again!' cried Peter, breathing fast. 'I know that I should not, in your place.'

Gina shrugged. 'When you live with a person it's hard to remember to keep still always. Besides, if Laurin is a changeling the dwarfs left, how can he help having a warped heart inside of him, any more than I can help having a point to my nose and chin?'

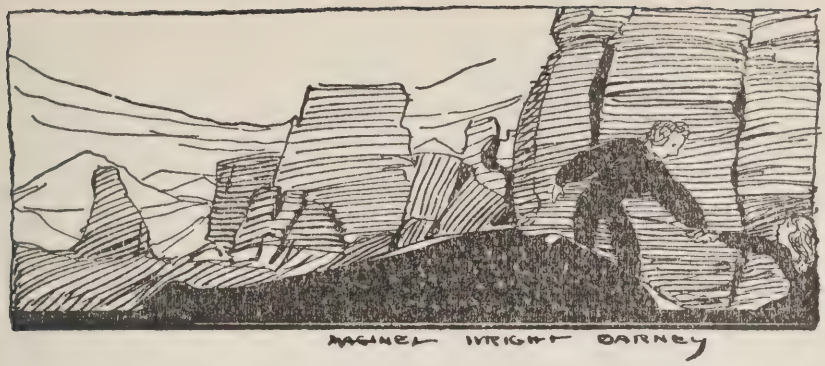
But Peter only shook his head. Such reasoning was beyond him. Perhaps it came from spending so much time among the high peaks.

'Would you like to see what my Penni was like?' he offered, fumbling for his locket. 'I have kept a feather to remember her by.'

'How soft it is,' Gina cradled it on her palm. 'What Saint is that you have about your neck, Peter?' She laid the feather carefully in his hand again. 'I have a medal too, that has been blessed by the Pope himself!'

'It's my Lady.' Peter after a slight hesitation let her see. 'My very own. I wear Her always because some day She may work a miracle for me and of course I wish to be on hand.' He sighed. 'It seems to me I stand in need of a miracle or two just now.'

He was interrupted by Gina's exclamation. 'Nonna Sunta has one like Her, too! Yes, she has, Peter, I have seen it. Or at least very nearly like without the pretty colors. She keeps it in a little box she used to let me open on Saints' Days if I was very good. It's strange, though, I never knew it was Our Lady before. I always thought it was some one Nonna Sunta used to know....'



CHAPTER XIV

The Storm on Cima Banche

'This must be the Sky Pasture,' said Peter to Margaret the Fair, as the steep path reached a fair and grassy slope starred with fragile Alpine flowers. Above, the 'Fingers' of Cima Banche rose, four irregular heaps of limestone which at this height no longer resembled fingers at all. As for the Thumb, only the tip of it was visible from here, although for most of their long climb it had seemed as if they would never get beyond it. No matter how much the trail curled and zigzagged, that monstrous pile of rock still rose directly above them, its crumbling apex tilted at the precarious angle it had assumed ever since it had been so miraculously prevented from crashing downward into the valley a century before.

'*Mamma mia!* But I'm hot!' Margaret dropped on the pasture's edge to fan herself with her béret,

for the day was strangely sultry for the mountains, and the climb had been longer than they had expected. 'I never dreamed it was so far! Are you sure it is the place, Peter? I don't see anybody.'

'I see sheep beyond that little rise,' answered Peter, 'and yes, there is Gina waving to us too!'

A small figure had suddenly risen up from the landscape and was leaping from marshy hillock to hillock in its haste to reach them.

'For three days I have looked for you,' cried Gina, as she came within earshot, 'I had begun to think you were not coming.' And she looked shyly at Margaret, who returned the stare with a cool glance of appraisal.

'I did not get back as soon as I thought for,' explained Peter, noting that she wore her new scarf. 'There were so many bridges down and roads washed away, because of the rains. But for all that we went clear to the Border, Walter Romany and I; I stood with one foot at home and one abroad. I'll wager you never did that!'

'No, I never did!' agreed Gina, distinctly impressed, but Margaret laughed in a superior way.

'I've seen lots more borders than you have, Peter!'

'I — I am glad the Signorina could come too,' said Gina hastily, for Peter was looking a bit dashed. 'The edelweiss this year is larger than ever.'

Margaret's eyes kindled, 'Oh, show me where it is, quick!'

'What was Laurin doing up here, Gina?' Peter demanded as she obediently led the way up the pasture.

'Laurin?' surprised. 'He was not here at all ——'

'We met him on our way up, and I thought he must have been up to see you ——'

Gina shook her head. 'I have seen no one but the twins. They are Widow Hanzi's.' She went on to explain. 'To-day I tend them along with the sheep, for the Widow Hanzi has had to return to her valley for the day, because yesterday 'Tresa, who is the oldest, hurt her arm and must be taken to the doctor; and little Matto also, who had a swollen face. She took the baby with her, too, but the twins she has left with me. They have five years' — (Gina was counting by Italian reckoning, which by Margaret's way of figuring would have made them only four) — 'so they take care of themselves. But there has been no sign of Laurin ——' She frowned. 'Perhaps he was hunting for chamois — it would not have been the first time he did that out of the season.'

'Perhaps he was. He had a gun, I remember.' Peter grinned as he recalled Laurin's look of utter discomfiture when they had met face to face on the narrow path. 'Here I am again!' Peter had said boldly, standing in front of him; and Laurin, staring

as if at a ghost, had muttered something beneath his breath, and pushing past rudely had flung himself off at a more rapid pace downhill...

The twins came running and stumbling over the uneven ground as they reached the pasturing flock of sheep, then, suddenly overcome with shyness at sight of two strangers, they halted at a safe distance and stood solemnly staring, their thumbs in their round red mouths.

'They speak only Ladin,' said Gina to Margaret as the latter tried to coax them nearer. 'But come, we must still go a little higher for the edelweiss, and,' she glanced up at the sky where behind the Four Fingers a white cloud had billowed up and hung motionless, 'soon you will have to start back again. It is a pity you came so late.'

'That was my fault,' said Margaret, 'but I could not help it. I had to wait so long for Madame Faraigo to be out of the way.'

'Perhaps,' said Peter, feeling for the first time a bit uneasy, 'you should have asked her after all. When she finds you are gone again, as before, she will be very angry ——'

Margaret shrugged. 'Yes, of course, but if I had asked her she wouldn't have let me come at all and I wanted to come! Besides, Pinky will tell her.' She giggled, 'Poor Pinky! But never mind, I tipped him well for it.'

Presently Gina paused and waved her hand. 'Look about you,' she commanded, 'and see what you see!'

'Edelweiss!' Peter spied a great white star twinkling beside a stone. 'And here is another! And another!'

'Oh, PE-ter! How do you find them? I don't see any! No, I don't want yours. I want my own!' Pouting with vexation, Margaret looked at the blossoms in his hand.

'Signorina,' Gina whispered slyly, 'look the other way. Over there for instance,' and she gave her a gentle push.

'I've found some too!' Margaret squealed with delight. 'Go away, Peter. You can't have any of these. They're all mine. I found them!' She was picking as fast as she could, and when she had them all — 'I see some more over there!' Scrambling up in great excitement, she paused an instant to give Gina a dazzling smile. 'And don't call me Signorina any more. My name is Margaret.'

After that, time was forgotten in the zest for discovery. Once Peter began: 'Perhaps we had better start ——' but Margaret interrupted him, 'Not yet, Peter, it won't take us so long to go down. And I see the biggest ones yet over there ——' And still there were bigger ones after that, and bigger ones...

All at once a long low rumble caused them to look at each other, startled.

'What was that?'

'I'm afraid,' Gina looked up at the sky, 'it was thun——'

A flick of light across their eyes finished her sentence for her.

'Thunderstorm!' Peter leaped to his feet. 'Come! We must start back at once! There is no time to waste.'

'We can't, Peter, we'll only get caught in it!' Margaret's face had grown white. Her voice was a wail, 'And I'm scared to death of thunderstorms!'

'Come to Widow Hanzi's hut,' Gina spoke up, 'and wait till it is over. It will not last long. Storms come and go like that,' she snapped her fingers, 'in the mountains. *Gemelli!*' she called to the twins, who had followed them, still at a safe distance. 'Run, *Gemelli*, and show them the way. I will go and see to the sheep.' And with that she flew across the Sky Pasture as if the wind, which was beginning to whistle among the peaks above them, had lent her its wings.

'Wait, Gina, I will help!' Peter would have started after her but Margaret's wail stopped him.

'Oh, Peter, don't leave me! Please don't go! I — I'm so f-frightened!' Peter looked after Gina's resolute figure. In a moment she would have reached the flock which were already huddled together as if

sensible of the approaching storm. Yes, there she was now tugging at the old bellwether. The wind blew the tinkle of the sheep bell away from Peter's ears, but the flock heard it and slowly one after another began to turn and follow.

The lightning flashed again. The first of the storm clouds boiled up behind the Four Fingers, and spilling over, rushed down the sky. Peter reached out and caught Margaret's cold hand.

'There's nothing to be afraid of,' he told her. 'I will take care of you,' and together they raced after the twinkling bare heels of the twins, while the clouds swooped down like birds of prey above their heads and the wind caught at their feet and the lightning tore in ever brighter darts above the waiting mountain peaks.

At last, they saw a rough hut ahead. There were stones on its roof to hold it down. Near it a few stunted trees struggled to live against the odds of altitude and winter storms; and beyond was the long sheepfold. Gina, coming by a shorter way, reached it at very nearly the same time and called to Peter to hold the rude door of the fold open, so she might get the flock in before they broke and scattered.

'There is one missing!' She panted as the last woolly tail went bobbing past her to shelter. 'It must be that black-faced ewe ——' She whirled as if to return to the Sky Pasture again.

'Gina! Come in!' Margaret, safe in the doorway of Widow Hanzi's hut, called to her in alarm. 'Quick!'

'I cannot come yet!' Gina poised impatient to be gone. 'I must find that other sheep first ——'

'But the storm!' Peter protested too. 'There isn't time, Gina.'

She shrugged scornfully. 'Do you think this is my first thunderstorm then? Besides, if it gets too bad I will wait beneath a rock until it is over.'

'It is beginning to rain now — you will get wet through in a little minute.'

'There is a big gray cape then hanging behind the door! That will keep me dry and besides, I may need the big pocket in it! Will you run and get it, Peter?'

Peter found the cape and brought it. 'Gina, I will go, too ——'

But she was already running off, its folds wrapped tight about her.

'Stay with Margaret,' she called over her shoulder to him. 'She's afraid. I'm not. Don't worry... I'll be back... soon ——'

Peter entered the house slowly. The wind slammed the door shut after him. Margaret, sitting on a bench against the wall, screamed and put her fingers in her ears. The twins stood beside her, their thumbs still in their mouths, their blue eyes round globes of astonishment.

Peter stared down at her gloomily.

'Oh, Peter, I was afraid you'd gone too.' Margaret showed her relief at sight of him. 'It was silly of Gina not to wait — Ooo —' as there was another flash of lightning — 'Peter, isn't it *awful*?'

'It's not as bad as it's going to be,' said Peter shortly. He went to the little window and peered out. 'It's like night outside,' he thought. 'I have myself never seen such a storm. I don't wonder Margaret is afraid. I wish Gina would come back...'

But a long time passed and still there was no sign of her. The lightning had grown continuous. Before one peal of thunder could die away another crash would make the crude house tremble. Margaret abandoned her bench and lay on the big wooden bed that took up one end of the room, her face buried in the feather mattress, her fingers in her ears. The twins, shaken out of their stoic calm at last, sat in the middle of the floor and howled. Peter tried in vain to hush them.

And still the storm roared above them, the rain hammered on the roof, and leaking through, dripped with a maddening patter on the floor. Peter had to hunt a copper pot to catch it. 'If it keeps up like this much longer,' he thought, 'the path will be washed away and we shall not get down to-night.' He wished harder than ever that Gina would come, but of course she must have taken refuge somewhere until the worst was over. It would have been foolish of her to try to get back in this! There were hailstones mixed with the rain — he could hear them thud against the window — and great flakes of snow. But luckily the clouds had stayed where they belonged, up in the sky. It was not so bad as long as one could see ——

At last the thunder insensibly lessened; the lightning, though still continuous, was not so vivid.

'Is it over?' Margaret sat up on the bed and re-

moved her fingers from her ears. 'When do you think we can start back? Oh, Peter, *where's* Gina?'

'Waiting, I suppose, until the worst is over.' He tried to speak confidently. 'We should hear her any minute now. As for starting back —' He went to the window again and pressed his forehead against the cold pane. And then his heart gave a frightened thump — he could see nothing, nothing at all! The clouds had come down at last! It was as if the house had been wrapped up tightly in cotton wool and put away in a box. They could not get out now, and — his heart thumped again — how could any one get in? Oh, Gina!

'How is it, Peter?' Margaret slid off the bed and came over to him, avoiding the twins in the middle of the floor. 'I am so cold!' Her teeth chattered. 'Aren't you? Feel my hands! How soon ——' Then she, too, saw the clammy blankness beyond the window...

'It is clouds,' he told her in answer to her uncomprehending stare, 'Clouds! And Gina is out in them! Already she may have lost her way!'

'Peter!' Margaret pressed her face to the window pane, as if that would help her to see. '*Peter*, where are you going?' for he had left her and, running to the door, threw it open. In her fright she forgot and spoke in English, but it did not matter; he understood perfectly. 'To find Gina...' he said.

The clouds closed in about him the instant he left the doorstep, enfolding him in a soft, cold, inexorable shroud. He had been in clouds before, many a time, but they were not like this. Beyond them somewhere he heard the sheep stamping in their fold, but the sound was muffled, wrapped like him in cotton wool. He took a few hesitating steps forward. 'Gina!' The steady drip of the rain answered him, and the distant mutter of the thunder. Beneath his foot a thousand little Voices seemed to stir and whisper underground...

'*Gina!*'

Nothing, nothing but blankness anywhere! And dark falling too, like a black curtain that is pulled across a window. It was no use. He had better go back —— But which way was back? He did not know! He thought it was this way and yet... Panic seized him. His heart pounded on his ribs, his breath caught in his throat. He screamed at the top of his lungs:

'*Margaret! Margaret!* Where are you?'

'*Ecco!*' Through the cloud her voice came back so near at hand he was more despairful than ever. 'Margaret, did you come too? Then we're both lost!'

'Why, no,' wonderingly. 'I'm only standing in the door.'

'He stumbled toward her, and tripped over the

threshold. 'I — I thought I was lost! It was *awful* — Margaret! *What was that?*'

It was not thunder, this time, nor was it wind; — that strange long-drawn rumble that shook the very earth beneath them. It sounded as if some giant had playfully rolled a great ball down the mountain — but not on them, no, not on them; — down the other side of Cima Banche, where Val Rosa lay.

'*What was that, Margaret?*'

'I — I don't know, Peter!' trembling.

'It sounded like nothing I ever heard before. I don't know, Margaret, but I... I, too, am afraid!'

CHAPTER XV

Wherein the Lady of the Locket Continues with her Miracle

On that selfsame afternoon, a few hours earlier, Walter Romany entertained two visitors in his little hut. One of them was Pinky, who acted as interpreter; the other was that gentleman in gray whom Peter had seen in the Valley Town. He sat on the one bench the hut afforded and questioned Walter Romany. 'Tell me,' he said, 'where did you come across this boy?' and when Walter Romany had recounted how he had come to meet Peter the Red first at Signorina Ida's, and then on the cloudy road, he continued:

'My daughter writes me he has a dimple on the back of his neck.'

'Yes, that is true, Signore... a tiny depression you might get the tip of a baby's finger into... though to myself I have thought it might be a scar rather than ——'

'Ah!' The Signore nodded. 'You are right. It is

a scar he got when a baby and — but I am talking foolishness! Go on with your story, Walter Romany.'

'It was hard on the boy to discover Nonna Sunta's words meant nothing,' Walter Romany observed when he had related everything. 'He had hoped for so long, and then to find them but the fancies of a befuddled mind! Yet he never shed a tear that *I* saw, though sometimes at night I used to wake and ...' here Walter Romany cleared his throat before he continued. 'And I — well, I began to do a little reflecting of my own upon the subject and, though I said nothing to him about it, I began to make discreet inquiries when I took my pack and went among the farms upon the valley slopes ——'

'And what did you learn?' The Signore leaned forward.

Walter Romany shook his head. 'Very little, Signore. Valley folk are wary of confiding in outsiders. I discovered this, however: Nonna Sunta, before the Bad Days, was servant to that American who had bought the Castle. It was destroyed, as many houses were in Val Rosa during the War; and since there was no one left to see it rebuilt, it remained in ruins. The American and his Signora were both dead, you see... and their child too — apparently.'

'Apparently? Why do you say that?'

'Because I do not know surely that he was not,

Signore! When the Bad Days came, all the Val Rosa folk fled south, or joined the fighting. Only Nonna Sunta stayed with her mistress, who was lying dangerously ill at the castle, her master having been already killed by a fall in the mountains. No doubt, the shock of it was too much for his young wife, or it may have been some other sickness; at any rate they lie buried together — the faithful Nonna attended to that — and the spot afterwards became a part of one of those little gardens of crosses which the Bad Days planted all over these mountains.'

'Yes, I know all that,' broke in the other impatiently. 'I have been to see them. Until lately I had no thought but that the child lay with them too, but now... this boy you have with you — Margaret wrote also that he wears a silver locket about his neck. Has he ever showed you what was in it?'

Walter Romany smiled. 'Only twice. He is very chary of showing his Lady.'

'So it is but a picture of the Madonna then, such as any child in Italy might wear?'

'I would not say that,' returned Walter Romany, slowly. 'Not every child has a Madonna who markedly resembles himself! And,' Walter Romany leaned forward, 'I was not the only one to observe that, Signore. Laurin...'

'Laurin? How should he know about it?'

'He is Nonna Sunta's son, remember — and be-

sides that, he used often to accompany that American on his ascents of the mountains; Laurin is the best guide in these parts, and the only man who has climbed the Thumb and lived to tell the tale. As doubtless you know, it was at the foot of the Thumb that the Signore was found dead ——'

'But even so, it is more than seven years since Laurin could possibly have seen the boy. How could he ——?'

'Tell me, did you yourself not notice a resemblance there in the Valley Town?' and when the Signore finally nodded, 'yet you at the time had no thought but that the boy was dead.... For all we may know, Laurin may have had good reason to believe that he was not. Therefore he would recognize him the more quickly. And to make sure, he even stole the boy's locket and looked for himself!'

'You mean Laurin has the locket now?' The Signore looked startled.

'Fortunately, we recovered it. He either lost it from his pocket or threw it away, having no more use for it. I did not understand all this at first,' admitted Walter Romany, 'but lately a great many things have become increasingly clear. When Laurin found us here in Val Rosa, he was afraid, Signore, that some one else might recognize the boy. For that reason he did his best to get us out of Val Rosa before your return. First he would have set the townsfolk

against us and when that failed he offered me money to leave,' Walter Romany twinkled. 'Is it any wonder I suspected something was afoot?'

'And so you did not go!' The Signore's tone held respect.

'Oh, yes, Signore. I did go — but I returned! However, you have come earlier than I thought for...'

'Earlier than I also expected — It was my daughter's letter brought me. And now, Walter Romany, since I see you are a shrewd fellow and have moreover been frank with me, I shall tell you a little story in return, which may — who knows? — explain the obscure parts of yours, and yours of it.'

'Proceed, Signore,' Walter Romany glanced out of the open door where the sunlight had turned to sickly pale among the larches.

'It is about a fellow countryman, an artist, who married and came abroad to live. Presently there was born a little son, and because afterwards his mother was never so strong again, they came up among the Pale Mountains to live — in a romantic but exceedingly uncomfortable castle!' The Signore wagged his head. 'I know because I visited them! I had met them, you see, one winter in Egypt and because I was interested, the artist invited me to come and admire his collection of mediæval jewelry — but of course, a man like you would know nothing

about such things! Well, I came, bringing my little Margaret with me — my wife had not been long dead then. Margaret was two years older than Peter, but they played together like a couple of puppies. That was when he tumbled down a flight of stone steps and cut his head. How he roared, the poor little fellow! The doctor said it would leave a scar. I remember it very well because I was so glad my little Margaret hadn't followed suit.

'Now we come to something else: the artist made a picture of the Madonna that summer. His wife posed for it. He was always painting her as that. She was very beautiful! Her hair was like ——'

'Like a Saint's halo,' murmured Walter Romany. 'Go on, Signore, I attend.'

'I wished to buy it of him, but he refused — and sent it to me as a gift the following Christmas! I seem to remember his writing something about having made a copy of it, small enough to fit into little Peter's locket —— He was going to do one of himself, too, but I suppose he was killed before he got to it. After that summer, because I was a lawyer, I took charge of certain business arrangements for him. Neither he nor his wife had any relatives, you see.

'Then the War came and I heard nothing for a long time until the Consul wrote me the meager facts. Afterwards I always intended to come over

and see for myself, especially as I had put my little daughter in a school in Rome, but one thing or another prevented and the years passed.

'One day I found in a store in New York a silver girdle which I would have sworn the artist had shown me that summer I had visited him. I asked them to trace it for me, and found it had been picked up in a little shop in this very section! That is why when I came over to get Margaret from her school this summer that I went to the Valley Town to see for myself. And there in the window of that little shop was another piece I could have sworn I recognized also! The shopkeeper said it belonged to a man who came from several days' journey away among the Pale Mountains; but if I would wait for the Fair he would without doubt come again. Well, Laurin came and the moment he said he was from Val Rosa I knew I had made no mistake. But I could not get him to admit he had ever known my friend the artist. He swore he had turned up the things while ploughing in his field, and that they had belonged to the feudal lords of the Valley five hundred years ago. I went back to Val Rosa with him on the pretense of bargaining for more of them; but before I could learn anything definite, I was called away to Paris on imperative business. I intended to return, however, and so I left Margaret here to wait for me. And now, if the boy is who I think he is...'

'If he is,' said Walter Romany, carefully refilling his pipe, 'what do you intend to do, Signore? Since you say he has no relatives will you take him back to live with you in your home beyond the sea?'

'I will take him back with me, yes, and see that he is put in some good school, though doubtless he will need some instruction over here to begin with.' He smiled. 'With the sort of upbringing he has had, he will scarcely be able to fit directly into his new environment. It will take a little training before we start, not to mention new clothes! There is plenty of money, of course, for everything he needs and vacations he will spend with us. You see,' added the Signore, in some embarrassment as Walter Romany made no answer to this, 'I — I intend soon to marry again, and I can hardly expect my new wife to adopt a strange boy who — at the present — is little better than a gypsy. But you may be sure that, for the sake of his father whose affairs I still have charge of, I will see that everything is done for him.'

'Doubtless, doubtless!' Walter Romany went and peered out of the door. 'Peter has believed for so long in his kingdom — but I wonder if he will not be a little surprised to find it lies beyond the sea.' He sighed but no one heard it, for at that moment there was a deep growl of thunder and a sudden gust of wind rushed past him into the little room.

'Is that a storm coming?' The Signore looked up

startled. 'And the children still on the mountain!'

'No doubt they are waiting somewhere till it passes.' Walter Romany spoke reassuringly, but his eyes were on the blue-black sky above the tips of the larches. Suddenly a jagged flash of lightning tore it in two. Thunder came tumbling after it with a roar that reverberated among the mountain peaks.

'But this is dangerous!' The Signore had risen. 'It may have caught them unawares. Perhaps we should go to look for them.'

'But, Signore,' Pinky hastened to point out to discourage him, 'there is no telling where they may be — and as Walter Romany says, they would surely have taken shelter long before this — Holy Saint Florian — What a crash!'

They stood in silence listening as the storm drew nearer and nearer and the larches bent beneath its furious onslaughts.

'How dark it is!' said the Signore after a while. 'Listen to the rain, will you!' — as it drove through the paper with which Walter Romany had replaced the broken window pane — 'It is a regular cloudburst! The path will be gone if this continues!' He began to pace the floor. Outside in his shed Botto stamped restlessly.

Presently Walter Romany, who stood at the window, started:

'There is some one coming, I think ——'

The Signore sprang to the door and jerked it open. The others followed. They saw a little figure flying out of the larchwoods toward them through the storm. It was a girl in a sodden cloak that flapped about her muddy ankles.

'Run!' she panted as the three stared at her, 'Run quickly! The Thumb... is going... to fall!' And she would have hurried on but Walter Romany reached out and caught a corner of her cape.

'Tell me, have you seen anything of a little boy and girl?'

'Peter Rosso? Yes! Don't worry. They are both safe in the Widow Hanzi's hut. It's *you* who are in danger? Can't you understand? The Thumb has begun to totter, I tell you! With my own eyes I saw... as I... was hunting... a lost...'

A slight movement in the woods behind her caught Walter Romany's eye. A gray four-footed shape hovered there. In the brief pause between lightning and thunder he heard its troubled cry.

At the sound the girl's cape bulged mysteriously and there came from its folds a muffled 'Ma-a-a-a!' which caused the superstitious Pinky to cross himself.

'That's only the mother sheep. Here!' The girl threw back her cape and drew from its huge pocket something soft and squirming, which she put into Walter Romany's astonished hands. 'It belongs to Martin the cobbler... near the church. It's his ewe that... will you see he gets it? I put it in my pocket so it wouldn't be drowned, but it's half smothered ... and besides I can hurry more without it...'

She vanished into the rain, leaving Walter Romany staring down at a tiny new-born lamb that panted on his hands and bleated plaintively.

'Did you ask for Margaret?' The Signore in gray shook his arm. 'Who was that? What has happened? I demand to know!'

'Tell him, Pinky —' Walter Romany, sheltering the wee lamb beneath his coat, prepared to plunge out into the storm. 'And I will get Botto. There's not a moment to lose if that girl speaks truth. We must warn the village!' As he led Botto out and hitched him to the little cart, he heard the patter of soft anxious feet behind him. The faithful mother sheep was at his heels. 'Your lamb will ride with us,' he told her over his shoulder, 'but you must still follow on foot, Signora Sheep, for there's no room for you too in the cart!'

Botto needed no urging to make him go. He galloped as if he knew his life depended on it.

'Have a sharp eye for the girl,' ordered Walter Romany as they skidded along the muddy road. But though they watched to right and left there was no sign of her flapping cloak; nor dared they slow up to search more carefully, for the village lay ahead of them all ignorant of an approaching fate. Yet, even as they reached its outskirts the bell in the gentian-towered church began to clang.

'That is the tocsin!' cried Pinky. 'She is there before us and has given warning. It was Saint Rosary herself, I tell you! Did not her friends the animals accompany her?'

CHAPTER XVI

In which Several Miracles Come to Pass and Nonna Sunta Remembers

Voices calling outside awakened Peter. He sat up on the narrow wooden bench where he had been huddled all night long and blinked his heavy eyes. Beyond the little window, day had come at last and though the clouds still pressed close to the pane, there was a curious luminousness to their whiteness which betokened a clearing day.

On the big bed at the other end of the room Margaret too was sitting up and looking about her in a dazed way. Her face was stained and stiff with the tears she had shed when worn out she had thrown herself once more upon the bed and fallen asleep. Her moon-gold hair was tossed and lustreless. Her sudden movement had wakened the twins and they

rolled over on their backs and stared at the ceiling with drowsy blue eyes.

'I thought I heard some one call,' began Margaret. 'Is it Gina? There it is again!'

No, it was not Gina, it was an unfamiliar voice that called. Suddenly the twins rolled off the bed and pattered across the floor, chirping happily.

'It must be the Widow Hanzi returned.' Peter went to the door. Coming up the mountain out of the clouds were three figures, two men and a woman. As the twins ducked past Peter, she gave a shrill scream and dropping to her knees on the soaking ground held out her arms to them.

'Are you then the boy from Val Rosa whom Gina has talked of?' she asked of Peter over the twins' burrowing heads, and cried when he said he was. 'You poor child, you! And where is Gina? And the sheep? Are they safe? All night have I prayed to the good Anthony...'

'The sheep are safe,' replied Peter, moving a little to make room for Margaret who had also appeared in the doorway, 'that is, all but one... Gina went back to look for it last evening before the storm broke, and — and she has not yet come back ——'

'You mean she went up there?' Here the older of the two men spoke up, and waved a big hand toward the Sky Pasture.

'*Carità!*' groaned the Widow Hanzi to her com-

panions. 'Did I not tell you something was not right up here? No wonder I spent the night on my knees praying! Whenever I would have risen, something pulled me down again! You see now why I made you start before it was light!'

'But I do not understand,' Peter stared from one sober face to the other and a queer cold hand seemed to close on his heart. 'She said she might have to take shelter somewhere until the storm passed, and afterwards, of course, the clouds were so thick.... But surely she will be coming any minute now.'

'There was a landslide last night, boy,' said the younger peasant. 'Did you not hear it, then? The top of the Thumb fell into Val Rosa. If that is your home, you may thank the Saints you were not there...'

'A landslide!' Suddenly Peter heard in his ears again that strange sound which was not thunder, not wind, not anything he had ever heard before. '*Val Rosa?*' And his eyes grew so wide and dark with horror that Margaret caught at his arm.

'Peter, Peter, tell me what has happened! Peter, why do you look so?'

'I heard of it in our village last night,' explained the younger man — he spoke a dialect that even Peter was hard put to it to follow — 'while I waited for the storm to lessen...'

The top of the Thumb! And right in the path of it, Walter Romany and Botto...! 'Was — was everybody killed?' His mouth trembled as he asked the question.

'No, that was the miracle of it — the villagers were warned in time and managed to escape ——'

'It was Saint Rosary who warned them,' cried the Widow Hanzi. 'The story was all over our valley by morning...'

'But what if Saint Rosary had been too busy with her own peculiar people to look out for a poor wandering peddler and his donkey?... And Gina... what had all this to do with Gina? *She* hadn't been in Val Rosa...!' Peter cried this last aloud.

'Who knows where she may have had to go in search of that ewe?' The older peasant shook his head. 'A sheep like that will lead you into most unlikely places... The child may have been too intent to notice... what was happening, until it was too late... However,' as Peter gasped in horror and Margaret, in sympathy, though she had caught little of the conversation, burst wildly into tears — 'However, we shall look. After all, it may have been but the clouds that detained her.'

'If you look,' said Peter rubbing his own eyes on his sleeve, 'I will help you.'

But though they searched and hunted, even among the Four Fingers themselves, which thrust

upward through the tearing cloud banks to the clean washed sky overhead, there was no sign of Gina nor of the truant sheep. At last they gave up and slowly started back to the Widow Hanzi's hut; Peter so blinded by his misery and despair that he stumbled over every sodden hillock until the men took him each by an arm and held him up.

'His eyes are half shut for want of sleep!' said the elder peasant to his son. 'It must have been a terrible night for one so young.'

As they neared the hut Margaret's slender figure came flying out. She was actually smiling and her feet seemed as light as Peter's were heavy.

'Oh, Peter!' she called, 'Peter! What do you think? We are safe! Everybody's safe. So don't look like that any more, Peter! Peter! Aren't you listening to me? They've come for us, your Walter Romany, and who do you think? My *father!*'

Peter raised his incredulous head. There in the doorway stood Walter Romany in very truth, puffing away as usual upon his long pipe. Behind him hovered the Signore in gray.

With a cry that was half a sob Peter stumbled forward. 'Walter Romany! Walter Romany! You are not dead and buried after all?'

'Dead and buried? Do I look it, little Peter?'

'Nor Botto, either?'

'Nor Botto, either, but our little house is no more,

and if you ask me for the spiders, I must tell you that they, alas, are gone too.'

But Peter was not caring for spiders. He heaved a deep, deep sigh. 'Then it is not quite so bad as I thought,' he murmured. 'There has been one little miracle, anyway.'

'A great miracle, I should call it,' broke in the Widow Hanzi who had appeared beside them. 'They say it was Saint Rosary herself. Tell me, did you happen to see her with your own eyes, Mister Romany?'

'With my own eyes,' averred Walter Romany gravely, but Peter looking at him quickly thought he caught the faintest hint of a twinkle in his eye.

'To think that you have seen a Saint!' cried the Widow Hanzi crossing herself in pious awe. 'Tell me, is it so, that there was a great light all around her, and did her animals accompany her?'

'There was a great light, *certamente*,' agreed Walter Romany. 'As for the animals, you had better ask Martin the cobbler what manner of beast is stabled in his barn this morning. For Martin is favored of Heaven — his house is untouched by the landslide and his barn has a new occupant — a very little one, I admit, but it will grow!'

'Tell me, Walter Romany,' said Peter in a low voice, as the Widow Hanzi discussed this new marvel with her two companions, 'did you really see the

Saint?' For he mistrusted the twinkle in the little man's eyes.

'How can one be sure, but —' here Walter Romany likewise dropped his voice, 'if it *was* the Saint, little Peter, she was wearing a scarf with red roses on it. I saw it when she threw back her cape.'

'It was Gina!' Peter the Red understood. 'It was Gina, then, who ran down the mountain and warned you. And everybody thinks it was a miracle. Ho! Ho!'

'It was a miracle, make no mistake of that,' returned Walter Romany. 'For surely God Himself must have leaned out of Heaven and placed that child's feet for her that they might not slip, and turned the edge of His lightning away that it might not strike her down, and lent her His strength too, that she might not falter until her task was done. A miracle? Certainly. What else?' And Walter Romany doffed his hat.

'And now, little Peter,' he continued when he had put it on again, 'there is something more. Another miracle was performed last night which concerns you particularly. But no, I — I do not believe I can tell you after all. You must ask the Signore,' and giving Peter a gentle shove, he turned away.

The Signore all this time had been talking earnestly with his daughter, and now they both turned to him as Peter stopped in front of them wonderingly, his

hands clasped behind his back. Margaret, with dancing eyes which held no trace of previous tears, interpreted.

'Peter,' said the Signore, 'I wish to see that locket which you wear about your neck.'

'My locket?' Peter was surprised and a tiny frown gathered between his brows. 'I — I do not ——'

'For a favor I ask it, as one gentleman of another.'

In that case what else was there to do? Peter slipped the chain slowly over his head and laid the locket on the Signore's outstretched hand. 'Penni's feather is inside,' he warned him, and after a while, as the Signore stood long and long gazing at the face within, 'It is not for sale, you know. It is my Lady, and I must never part with Her because some day She may work a miracle for me ——'

'She has worked a miracle for you already, Peter. (Tell him, Margaret!) She has showed me who you are with not a shadow of a doubt. The Lady of your locket is your own mother, Peter, your own American mother, who once lived — she and you and your father — down there in that old castle on the hillside. I knew them a long, long time ago...'

After that there was a great deal to ask, and more to answer, so that Peter scarcely knew when they said farewell to the Widow Hanzi and started down that mountain path which yesterday he had climbed, not knowing who he was at all! But when they

reached the part where a few short hours ago the Thumb, now but a crumbling stump of rock, had loomed so high and menacing above them, he shivered and once more began to notice his surroundings.

'But how did you ever manage to make your way up here, Walter Romany, and come to us?'

'It was not easy,' the other, who was leading the way, admitted. 'The path was often buried deep in earth and rocks and fallen trees. Besides, the Signore would not wait until daylight came to start. And who could blame him? I was myself in the same state.' (Here Peter chuckled to himself, for he couldn't imagine Walter Romany in any state except of calmness.) 'Several villagers accompanied us with lanterns and torches.'

'But what became of them? Do they wait somewhere for us?'

'No, little Signore, they turned back. The last part of the path, having escaped the landslide, was easy enough to follow, and — also we had come upon some one by the way, who was badly injured...'

'Injured? How? Who was it?'

Walter Romany hesitated. 'Your fine Signore friend bade me say nothing of it, since he judged you would have had enough horrors for one night, and...'

Peter glanced over his shoulder. 'He is far behind, helping Margaret down a steep part. Tell me, Walter Romany...'

'Well, you are a man, as well as a Signore yourself now... and besides I gathered that it concerns you somewhat.... I will tell you. It was Laurin they found by the pathside...'

'Laurin?' Peter's eyes widened. 'Had the — had the landslide killed him then?'

'Not killed. His leg was broken and I fancy there were other injuries. But it was not the landslide, it seems, that was responsible. He had been climbing the Thumb, when the storm came up, and in his haste to get down before it caught him he fell, just as your father did many years ago. But Laurin was luckier. He was not killed outright. He managed to drag himself beneath the shelter of a rock and there he lay, and saw in the lightning the Thumb waver and fall. It must have missed him by a hair's breadth. Such an experience would make the worst man look to his conscience! And Laurin looked well to his; for when he saw the American Signore bending above him, he cried out that there was a bundle near by that belonged not rightfully to him but to the master of the Castle before the Bad Days. At once we looked about and found it, lying on a broken rock. Its contents had fallen out, but I gathered them up as quickly as possible and came on with the Signore to find you, while the others carried poor Laurin as gently as they could down the mountain.'

'And what did you gather up?' Peter eyed with

sudden interest the large bandana which Walter Romany carried by its knots. Though he had noticed it before, he had been too taken up with the wonder of who he was and that he had, as one might say, a kingdom after all — though it lay unfortunately beyond the sea — to display his usual curiosity over its contents.

'Jewelry, little Signore, bracelets and girdles and ——'

'Then they must belong to Margaret, not to me. And that is the third time you have called me Signore. Have you forgotten my name?'

'No, but things are changed now. It would scarcely be proper for me, a humble peddler, to call a fine gentleman by his Christian name.'

'What is improper about it?' demanded Peter, 'and besides nothing is changed, except that... except that I know who I am now and... Walter Romany, why should that make such a difference?'

'There are things that do, though it is hard to explain why, especially when one has to keep one's mind on one's feet. Soon you will understand for yourself without my explaining, little Pe—— Signore. Are you — did your Signore friend say how soon you would be going beyond the sea?'

'Not for a long time yet,' returned Peter uncomfortably. 'He says he has still certain business to attend to first, and also I must be taught certain

things —— Walter Romany, I — I am not at all sure I wish to go beyond the sea ——'

'Of course you do!' declared the little man cheerfully. 'Have you talked all this time about being a Prince only to turn away when the opportunity comes? Surely you are not going to act again as you did that day I told you to call Nonna Sunta! As for learning certain things — every Prince must be trained for his profession, just as every one must, be he priest or peddler!'

'Margaret says there are no such things as Princes beyond the sea ——'

'Then there will be the same thing with another name,' declared Walter Romany decisively. 'There is not a country in this world but has its Royalty!'

At Saint Rosary's Knoll they were forced to take the steep path by which Peter had come the day he fell foul of the barbed wire, for the other way past the woodcutter's hut, said Walter Romany, was quite impassable.

'Nonna Sunta's cottage escaped untouched,' he added. 'Saint Rosary's Knoll divided the avalanche in two, and part poured down upon our hut and all the pretty fields — many of which were ready for the harvesting — and the new end of the village. The other part piled up on the hillside and covered little more than the castle which had been ruined already. Between the two, Nonna Sunta's

hut had stood as safe as if it were an island in a foaming sea.'

'I am glad of that,' said Peter, and wondered if Gina was there now. He would have liked to see her.

As if she had heard his unspoken wish, Gina came running toward them presently, up the narrow path. But what a different Gina from the happy one of the day before! Her dress was torn and dirty; her gay scarf lay limp about her neck; her tangled hair hung in strands across her face and when she pushed them back, Peter saw her eyes staring so tragically in their shadowed hollows that he decided Walter Romany had made a mistake, and the little cottage had been destroyed after all.

But before he could ask her Gina had caught his hand, crying: 'Peter, come quick! Nonna Sunta is — is very sick and she asks for you!'

'For *me?*'

'Yes, for you! Just now! She woke up and said your name. "Peter! Peter!" And when I said to calm her that I would call you, she smiled and asked me first to bring that little box she used to let me open on Saints' Days...'

'But what has happened to her? Did Laurin push her again?'

'No, no! Laurin isn't here. I don't know where he is! I couldn't find Nonna Sunta for a long time

either until some men brought her in from the fields where they found her ... near the castle. She's been going there more than ever lately... since that time Laurin... since she fell and hurt her head! She must have gone there in the storm and couldn't get back, and then the landslide started and... The doctor said he could do nothing. I thought she must be dead until she spoke your name, Peter.' All at once she swayed and would have fallen into a tired heap if Walter Romany had not caught her.

'Nonna Sunta asking for Peter?' The Signore in gray was on the alert at once when this was explained to him. 'Then we must go immediately. She is probably dying and...'

'Dying?' said Walter Romany. 'Then I had best fetch the priest.'

Nonna Sunta lay in her narrow bed by the wall. Her eyes were closed, but she did not look as if she were in pain. Indeed she smiled a little as if well content. On the counterpane lay open a pasteboard box that had once held milk chocolates. Nonna Sunta's fingers rested on a small photograph that lay within, which she had not had the strength to lift.

Now, when Peter said to her softly, 'Nonna Sunta, did you want me? I am here' — she stirred and slowly lifted her sunken lids. Her dim gaze rested

on his face and the halo of red gold hair about it. Her lips moved. He had to bend very close to hear.

'Peter,' her voice was barely more than a sigh, 'I had forgotten... you were so... big...'

'What shall I say?' Peter's ready tongue deserted him. He looked desperately at the others, at Gina crying on her knees beside the bed; at Margaret standing awed beside her father; finally at the Signore in gray himself. 'Tell me, what must I answer?'

'Say,' prompted the Signore through Margaret, 'you are not so very big; doesn't she remember that you have eleven years?'

'Eleven years?' A faint frown appeared between Nonna Sunta's brows. 'I did not know it was so long since...' she turned her head on the hard pillow. 'It was only a bad dream then... when I thought you were lost... that day I went to beg milk for you... along the Lombard road. The fever was bad among the marshes... I burned with it that day I remember ... and I thought I could not get back... and when I did you were gone... and I hunted and hunted for so long... Thank God, it was but a fever dream...'

'Yes —' something caught in Peter's throat — 'it was only a bad dream, Nonna. See, I am not lost at all.'

The fingers that rested on the photograph made another vain effort to lift it. 'You find it, Peter,' she

whispered at last wearily, 'I give it to you. It's your mother's... she gave it to me... long ago... I... loved her... and I tried... to do my best... for you...'

CHAPTER XVII

Wherein Peter the Red Ends his Story and Begins a New One

Some weeks later Peter the Red walked out of that hotel beside which Signorina Ida's humble inn would have appeared as nothing, into the great square of the Valley Town. As he passed, the hotel-keeper bowed until his middle button creaked, and a porter, wielding his broom near by, dropped it and sprang to hold the door for him. Peter nodded as carelessly as any prince to a menial, but there was a glint in his eye as it rested on the man's little green apron which would have confused the simple fellow, had he observed it. He did not, however, see it.

'A good day, Signore,' he said, ducking and bowing — although the day, which had indeed been a good one, was by now very nearly past. '*Thank* you, Signore — may Saint Marco, who is my patron saint, reward you,' and he tucked the silver coin which Peter tossed him underneath his green apron.

'How do you call yourself, my man?' demanded

Peter, and the glint in his eyes became more noticeable than ever.

'Berto,' returned the other. 'At your service, Signore.'

'Very well, then, Berto, go buy yourself some gold buttons with that money.'

'Gold buttons?' Berto looked puzzled. 'Ah, Signore, what would a humble person like myself need with gold buttons?'

'I suppose that is true,' Peter nodded. 'Very well, then, you may do something else for me. If the Signorina — you know, the little one who is like a Princess — should come asking for me, say you do not know where I am.'

'That is true, Signore,' Berto grinned and winked — 'I do not know!'

Once out of sight of the Hotel, Peter hastened his steps. He crossed the Square and made his way down the same narrow cobbled street over which Botto had come clattering to the Valley Fair in the chill of an early morning. But when he was outside the Town Gate he slowed his steps once more, peering carefully to right and left. Presently he saw what he looked for — a little cart drawn up beneath a grove of chestnut trees, a mouse-gray donkey hobbled near by, nodding over his evening meal; a thread of smoke drawn straight upward from a smouldering campfire to the paling sky.

'Walter Romany!' Peter put his hands to his mouth. 'Oo-ee, Walter Romany!'

From around the corner of the cart appeared a strange woman, a woman such as he had never laid eyes on before. She wore a gay red skirt and a bright blue blouse and there were loops of gold in her ears. Her black eyes snapped a shrewd glance at Peter.

'Do you wish your fortune told, little Signore?'

He shook his head, for the moment struck dumb with astonishment, but at last he managed to stammer: 'What are you doing with Walter Romany's little cart?'

'Romany! Romany!' repeated the woman irritably. 'Every one calls him that and if they but knew — though he tried a hundred years he would never make a Romany!' and she added, 'Perhaps that is why I came back to him.'

'Oh, *you*,' cried Peter, beginning to understand, 'then you must be his wife, the Gypsy Woman!'

'And who else, I ask you, would put up with such a shabby cart as this? It was certainly time I came back to him! Men get so careless when there is no woman around. He looks a different person already. And you,' she bent to stare at him more sharply, 'I believe you are that boy my husband is continually speaking of. You'd think to hear him talk there was none other like you in the world, and not only him

but —' She stopped and called over her shoulder: 'Gina! Gina!'

'Is Gina here?' cried Peter, his face lighting. 'Now, that I did not know either!'

Gina, coming slowly from a little spring which tinkled beyond the chestnut grove, looked up at the call, stared, dropped her copper water-pot, and came leaping to meet him on joyous feet.

'Peter!' she cried, and made as if to throw her arms about him, until, recollecting he was a fine Signore now, she put them behind her instead. 'Peter, have you come to stay?'

'Of course not!' The Gypsy Woman answered for him. 'As if any one would be a peddler who could be a fine gentleman!'

'Which would you be?' Peter asked her. 'If you could be either, that is.'

She shrugged. 'That's different! There's gypsy blood in me.'

'I begin to think there is in me too,' observed Peter with a sigh, 'though I used to be angry if any one said so.' He looked at Gina. 'Walter Romany never told me you were going to take my place.' There was a hurt note in his voice.

'We did not know it, Peter, until after you had left Val Rosa.'

'And where is Walter Romany now?' Peter had been expecting every moment to see the little man

emerge from behind the cart, his familiar pipe in his mouth.

'Gone to the back streets,' said the Gypsy Woman. 'I wonder you did not meet him. This is his last trip this year. To-morrow we leave in the morning early for the towns further to the south.'

'So soon?' cried Peter in sharp dismay; 'but I have only found you!'

And he thought with an ache in his heart that soon they would be seeing Signorina Ida with her kind thin shadow of a smile; and Maria Madelina too, perhaps. He would like to see Maria Madelina's face when she learned what had happened to him! And they would pass the saffron-colored church and the little Holy Field where Papa Ott's body lay... He blinked back the quick tears.

'If it hadn't been for me,' declared the Gypsy Woman, 'you wouldn't have found us at all. It was I who went to the hotel and left word that we were here. *He* had so little spirit he'd have gone away without seeing you at all. I do not know what has come over him! It used to be he would argue with me from sunrise to set, and set to rise again, if I would let him; and now he sits smoking at that pipe of his hour after hour and never says a word!'

'Oh, Peter, how beautiful you look!' Gina could contain her admiration no longer.

'Do you think so?' Peter swelled out his chest.

'This suit only came to-day. I put it on so Walter Romany could see it. There were dozens of others I might have worn.' He said this carelessly.

'Do you have dozens of shoes too? Look, you've got these all dusty on the road,' and she would have brushed them off but he interfered.

'It does not matter. I put them outside my door at night and in the morning I take them in as shiny as ever.'

'Peter... how? Is it magic?'

'No, the porter,' and he grinned. 'Still, even if I could not get them clean again, I shouldn't care so much, Gina. Shoes and stockings are something I could well get along without.' He made a little face. 'You cannot guess how hot they are or how they pinch your toes! But the Signore says I must learn to wear them, for beyond the sea no one ever does otherwise. I begin to believe it is a most peculiar place — that beyond the sea! The Signore has engaged a foolish woman to come every day and teach me many foolish things, while he is away on business of his own. He says he cannot take me over there until I have learned a few manners, and can at least read and write a little.'

'Manners?' said Gina. 'What are they like?'

'Something that does not make sense,' Peter frowned. 'Would you like to see me write my name?' he asked suddenly, and breaking off a chestnut twig

he wrote on the dusty road, PETER VALENTYNE. 'That is my real name,' he boasted. 'And it took two saints to make it.'

'Write mine for me, Peter, please.' Gina gazed at him in greater awe than ever.

'Well, as to that... it is a little more difficult and ... it would take me too long...'

'Here comes Walter Romany,' interrupted the Gypsy Woman, and Peter nearly upset Gina as he whirled about and darted toward him.

'Peter, little Peter!' Walter Romany caught him as he leaped into his arms. 'Eh, but you are a grand little Signore now. Even your hair has been cut.' He sighed. 'It is a pity. It has spoiled your halo.'

'I am not a Signore any more, Walter Romany, not at least while I am here. But you are looking different... I verily believe you have had your hair cut too!'

'It was my wife, the Gypsy Woman, did it,' explained Walter Romany sheepishly, 'the very first day she appeared, which was the third after you had left Val Rosa. She preferred me after all it seems, to a crowd of thieving gypsies, and when she heard that I was in the Pale Mountains too, she left them and came back. Still, I suppose it is all for the best. Otherwise Gina might have been in an orphanage by now! There seemed no other place for her, with Nonna Sunta in Holy Field and Laurin helpless in a

hospital in the next valley for many months to come. So you see, my wife, the Gypsy Woman, has come in very handy. Only once in a while...' he sighed, 'I get a little lonely for one of my own sex to chat with.... But let me look at you, boy,' he held him off. 'Quite changed you are from that day you came down over the cliff! Do you remember that? Torn trousers and an old black shirt much too big for you, with Penni's head...' He paused and stared at him. 'But haven't you heard the news? Gina, do you mean you did not tell him?'

'I forgot!' Gina crimsoned with shame. 'I was so happy to see him I quite forgot, Walter Romany. But come now, Peter, and I will show you.'

Peter followed her twinkling feet — not hampered like his by creaking shoes! — to where on the edge of the chestnut grove the grass grew lush and grasshoppers leaped snapping into the sunny air. And here Peter stopped, blinking, incredulous. It could not, it simply could not be true, and yet it *was!*

There, out of the grass, stepped Penni, as plump and as casual as ever!

'*Cocodè!*' she said, '*Cocodè!*' and after her came tumbling nine little yellow chicks!

'PENNI!' forgetful of his new clothes Peter dropped to the ground and held out his hand to her. 'Where did you come from? And where did you get that family?'

'*Cocodè!*' scolded Penni, and she shook out her gray feathers until she was twice her size and gave his fingers a smart peck. 'Keep away from my children!' And with that she turned her back on him and walked off, the nine yellow balls after her.

'Penni!' Peter stared, the pecked hand still held out to the empty air. 'I never would have thought *you* could treat me so.' And the hurt tears sprang to his eyes. 'Especially after I had thought you dead!'

'It's only because she has a family,' Gina tried to console him. 'Besides, she has not seen you for so long, and you can't expect a hen to have a long memory, you know. If you were to be here all the time, she'd soon get used to you again.'

'But where did she get them?' Penni had just scratched a worm out of the ground and called her brood to come and see. 'They don't look much like her... And here all the time we thought she was run over!'

'They aren't really hers,' answered Walter Romany who had followed. 'She must have adopted them while they were still eggs in the nest;—though whether she chased their rightful mother away, or whether it was the latter was run over and Penni found the empty nest and took the eggs under her own wing, we cannot know unless she chooses to tell us... which isn't likely ——'

'To think in all that time we never saw her!'

Peter could not get over it. That his Penni should have acted so!

'Doubtless the nest she had found was too far away for her to come all that distance every time she was hungry. Instead she visited the nearest farmhouse and picked up a little meal with the hens there.' He chuckled, 'You could always trust Penni to make her own plans, you know.'

'Nevertheless,' put in Gina, 'I think it was the good Saint Francis who loves all birds, whether wild or tame, that put his hands over her nest the night the Thumb fell, and kept it safe.'

'I told you,' nodded Walter Romany, 'that was a night of miracles! And it was the very day you left Val Rosa, little Peter, that I, driving home in some ... abstraction, chanced to notice something walking up the road before me. It was Penni, leading her family back to call on us, I do believe, not knowing of course that the woodcutter's hut was gone and I had had to pick a different camp!'

'Penni!' Peter followed her with loving eyes. 'My Penni! Do you remember, Walter Romany, how you wondered at the name? It was because of a favorite story my mother used to tell me years and years ago — all about a hen named Penny — that I called her so, though I never knew it at the time! And as for Botto... do you know, *I* had a little donkey all my own once (the Signore told me so), he

used to draw me in a pretty painted cart, and his name was "Bottom"! Oh, Walter Romany, don't you think it strange how everything has come about, when for a while I thought that nothing...?'

'Well,' Walter Romany smiled, 'in a way I was not so much surprised, little Peter, to learn that the kingdom you liked to talk about lay beyond the sea.'

'I begin to think it is not so much of a kingdom either,' answered Peter gloomily. 'There are neither castles nor Pale Mountains, it seems, but only shoes and manners and ——'

'Still, it must have its compensations. If there are no Pale Mountains, there are very likely no dwarfs either —— ' and with that they spoke of Laurin.

'We stopped to see him in the hospital, you know,' said Peter, 'when we left. He admitted that he had been intending to leave Val Rosa for good, taking what remained of my father's possessions with him. It seems he had become frightened when he met me again face to face on the way to the Sky Pasture...'

'But how did things like necklaces and earrings come to be upon the mountain side?'

'My father had hidden them somewhere high upon the Thumb when the Bad Days came and he saw they might have to leave without a moment's warning and no time to take anything with them, but their clothes upon their backs... and me, of course!

It was on the way down from hiding them that he fell and was killed. Laurin, who was still in the valley, because he had not yet made up his mind which side of the fighting to join, discovered him lying dead at the bottom.

'So, when the Bad Days were over, he decided to climb the Thumb and see for himself why it was my father had elected to climb it alone at such a time. And after a while he discovered!' Peter shrugged. 'The Signore in gray says that some day I shall appreciate all those woman's things because they were made by the greatest goldsmith in all Italy many, many years ago. Perhaps I shall, who knows? But I hope their glitter will not keep me awake as it did Laurin, until finally he resolved to try to sell them for himself. But he was cautious. He brought only a few at a time down from their hiding place. That was how the earrings happened to be there the day Nonna Sunta offered them to me ——'

'... And Nonna Sunta in her poor confused mind recognized you,' nodded Walter Romany, 'and tried to give them back. Go on with your tale, little Peter.'

'There is nothing more to tell,' said Peter, spreading out his hands. 'That is the end of the story.'

And all at once his throat hurt him so he could not breathe; and the chestnut leaves above his head seemed to swim in water.

'Oh, Walter Romany! I do not want an end to the story! I want it to go on and on... I want to keep pretending I am a Prince — or whatever Princes are called in that country beyond the sea — and being all the time just a peddler's boy, who travels up and down the hills with you and Botto, and Penni and Gina and your wife, the Gypsy Woman...'

'In that case I should have to sell my cart and get a larger,' Walter Romany managed to chuckle but his eyes were strangely wet. 'Well, every story must have an ending sometime, little Peter, no matter how much you've enjoyed it...'

'But you can always start a new one,' broke in the sharp voice of the Gypsy Woman, and she said to Walter Romany scornfully, 'What is wrong with you that you stand there stupidly, saying nothing but the wrong things?'

With that she threw a handful of corn upon the ground and called to Penni:

'*Qui! Qui! Qui!*'

Penni came legging it, her family after her, to pick up the kernels. The Gypsy Woman bent down and picked up a peeping little yellow ball in her hard brown hands and Penni never said a word!

'I wonder,' thought Peter, who could hardly bear it, 'how long it would be before she would let me do that... if I were here, that is?'

'There's ever a new tale beginning,' said the

Gypsy Woman again, 'and if you don't like the one that other folk would tell you — about princes and kingdoms beyond the sea — why then, make up your own!'

'Yes, Peter, make up your own!' cried Gina. 'And put us in it, I and Penni and Botto and — the Pale Mountains ——'

The Pale Mountains! Peter looked up as if expecting to see the shining peaks above him still. How he had grown to love them, even Cima Banche, that would not fall again surely for another hundred years! Every night he dreamed of them. Gold peaks and high air and larchwoods and the feel of a little wind that had cooled its toes upon a glacier. Where he was to live, beyond the sea, there were no mountains, not even, so Margaret had said, sizable hills! How would he ever breathe?

Suddenly it was as if the tears in his eyes had washed a kind of dust from them and, for the first time since he had found out who he was, he could see clearly again. He saw that his kingdom was right here among the Pale Mountains — hadn't his own father chosen it before him? — and Walter Romany's little cart was his throne!

'But the Signore in gray,' Walter Romany, looking away, reminded him. 'After all he is of your own people ——'

'Not any more than you are, Walter Romany,'

declared Peter. 'And besides it is not as if he were to take me as a son, as you once wished to do! I am to go to a school; and schools,' he made a wry face, 'Margaret tells me, are worse than learning manners from a foolish woman! No, I cannot feel the Signore will mind so much since he will know I am in good hands. He has a great deal of respect for you, Walter Romany; and I — I think he begins to feel a little sorry for me. Margaret told me only yesterday that once in her hearing he had said to that foolish woman, '"Do you think it is possible ever to train a wild squirrel to appreciate his cage?"'

'As for missing Margaret,' he grinned, 'Gina will do just as well to play with for the present, and later, when I am grown up if I wish to go and visit her beyond the sea, what is there to hinder?'

But Walter Romany still demurred. 'Think it over, little Peter. I cannot help but feel your eyes are blinded just now with the sun of our affection...'

The Gypsy Woman set Penni's chick down quickly, and rising, said in Peter's ear, 'There is not much time to think it over. We leave, remember, to-morrow morning early. However, we shall pass the hotel and ——'

'There is a little window,' he whispered back, 'on that side which faces Saint Christopher on the church wall. You must look sharp, for a chestnut

tree almost hides it. Stop beneath it as you leave and I will tell you what the new story will be....'

Very early the next day, while the Morning Star still held its lighted candle in the East and dark was barely fading into gray, Botto's sharp heels went clattering down the shadowy cobblestones. Saint Christopher, that gentle giant, smiled benignly as he passed. In the high church tower the Three Sisters still slept until it should be time to wake the Valley

Town from slumber. Past the great hotel went Botto — and paused an instant beneath a little window, half hidden by the spreading branches of a chestnut tree.

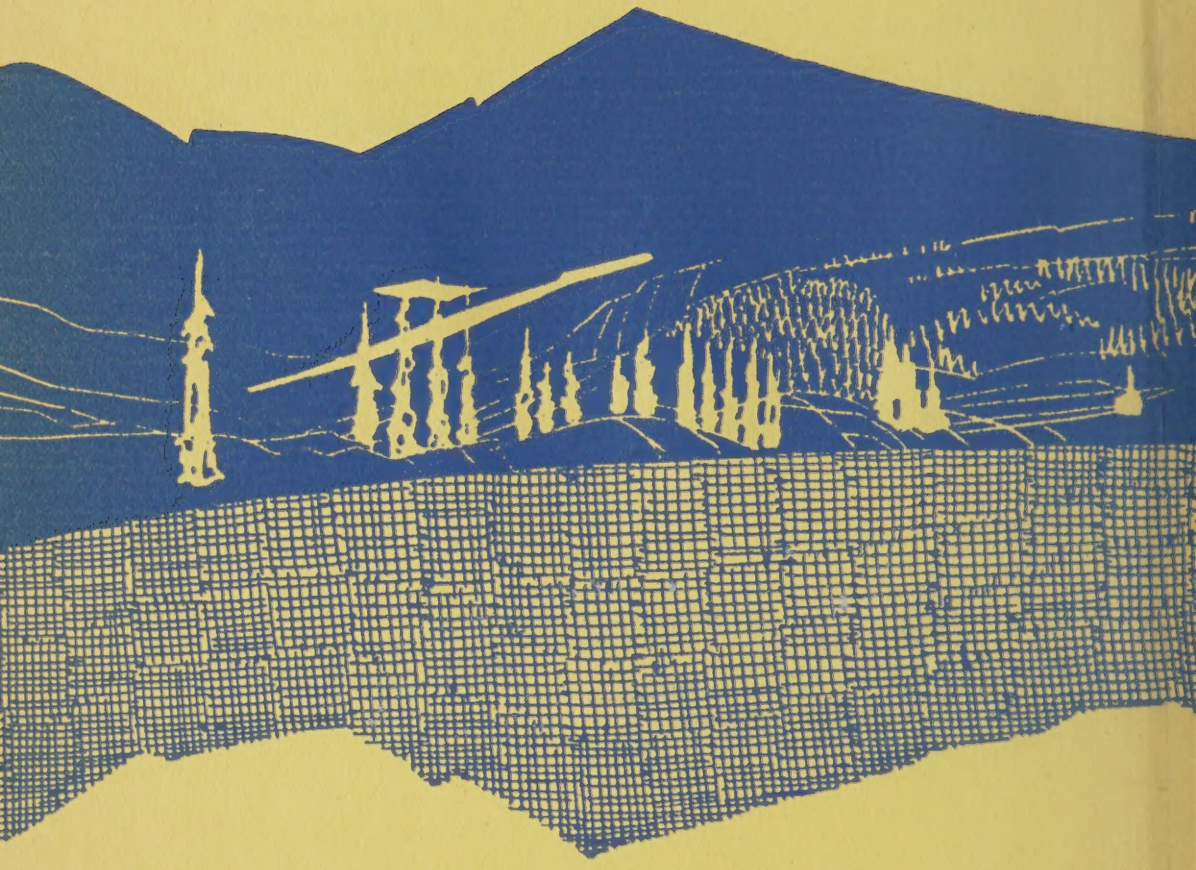
'He does not come!' breathed Gina, a catch in her throat, but at that moment the chestnut leaves rustled and there was a light thud upon the cover of

the cart. An instant later two bare heels swung so close to Walter Romany's nose they knocked his hat over his eyes. Then Peter the Red squeezed into the seat beside him, and Botto nodding went on his way again.

Presently the sun came up on the dew-wet countryside. A late lark rose from a near by meadow, and Botto slowed of his own accord to snatch the sweet grass by the roadside. Within the little cart Penni could be heard stepping delicately and clucking to her brood. Walter Romany took his pipe from his mouth and smiled:

'The sun for our eyes, and a bird's song for our ears, how about a bit of bread for our stomachs, little Peter?'

THE END



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